

JUDAISM

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Separation Anxiety: From Founders to Fundamentalists

STEPHEN J. WHITFIELD

THE FIRST TIME AN AMBITIOUS YOUNG POLITICIAN named Huey Long ventured into southern Louisiana, the local boss who was in charge of the campaign tour warned him as follows: "Huey, you ought to remember one thing in your speeches today. . . . We got a lot of Catholic voters down here." "I know," Long replied, and in every small town where he spoke that day, he would begin with a childhood recollection: "When I was a boy, I would get up at 6 o'clock in the morning on Sunday, and I would hitch our old horse up to the buggy and would take my Catholic grandparents to mass. I would bring them home, and at 10 o'clock I would hitch the old horse up again, and I would take my Baptist grandparents to church." The effect of this account, coming from a politician from the northern and Protestant part of Louisiana, was obvious. On the way back to Baton Rouge that night, the local boss remarked with admiration: "Why, Huey, you've been holding out on us. I didn't know you had any Catholic grandparents." "Don't be a damn fool," the candidate replied. "We didn't even have a horse."¹

There are a couple of lessons to be drawn from that true story, apart from the obvious one that the speeches of politicians are to be taken with a stalactite of salt. One is that, in American politics, religion can sometimes be of great importance; and even office-seekers who lack faith themselves, like Long, must reckon with the significance that religion enjoys among their constituents. The other lesson is that, even in the most thoroughly and homogeneously Protestant section in the Western Hemisphere, which is Dixie, more than one version of religion prevails, more than one expression of piety exists; and therefore the political culture must grapple with the varieties of religious experience. How the American legal and Constitutional system was intended to address the problem of faith—or, rather, of faiths—bears directly upon the Jewish condition and affects the status of a minority that has been acutely vulnerable in the historical experience of Christendom. In uncoupling church from state, the Founders created a distinctive heritage to which American Jewry has been indebted, and which this essay is designed to elucidate.

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Consider, for example, the following prayer: "Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence on Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our country."² This meek supplication was as innocuous as a ticket stub for a parking garage. This prayer was addressed to a deity that bears little resemblance to the fiery and jealous God of the Patriarchs (though Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, endorsed this faint meditation as intended to "engrave upon the child's mind the idea that any wrongdoing is an offense against the divine authority and order").³ Composed by the New York Board of Regents, this prayer was nevertheless outlawed by the Supreme Court in 1962, provoking such uproar that the Congress considered a Constitutional amendment to spike the majority opinion in *Engel v. Vitale*. Representative George W. Andrews (D-Ala.) denounced the Justices because "they put the Negroes in the schools and now they've driven God out," and Senator Sam Ervin (D-N. C.) complained that "the Supreme Court has made God unconstitutional."⁴ Senator Herman Talmadge (D-Ga.) interpreted the decision as "putting God and the devil on an equal plane," a serious charge when about half the population professed belief in the actual existence of Satan.⁵ Representatives of the nation's largest religious denomination were outraged: the Catholic weekly *America* called *Engel v. Vitale* a "stupid decision . . . that spits in the face of our history"; and an articulate Catholic layman, William F. Buckley, Jr., added that the First Amendment "was not designed to secularize American life." A year later the Court, by an 8-1 majority, outlawed the reading of the Bible in public schools, sowing the seed for the emergence of the New Right that sought to combat and to conquer the Godlessness and immorality that supposedly afflict the nation. Even a prayer that omitted mention of a deity, and was to be uttered by kindergarten children receiving their cookies and milk ("We thank you for the flowers sweet,/we thank you for the food we eat,/we thank you for the birds that sing/we thank you for everything"),⁶ was banned. No wonder then that President Kennedy quipped in 1963 that "the Chief Justice has assured me that our school bill is clearly constitutional—because—it hasn't got a prayer."⁷

How could such a situation have emerged within the lifetime of most Americans? Why has the Constitution been read in that way, and how has the emergence of outraged religious groups affected both the interpretation of that document and the status of civil liberties? The rise of the right, especially the religious right, over the past couple of decades has posed a broad challenge to certain Constitutional interpretations. Its rise has decisively affected American politics, having helped in 1980 to put President Jimmy Carter on a midnight train to Georgia and replace him with the embodiment of the aspirations of an insurgent Christianity, Ronald Reagan. As many as eight million white evangelical Christians switched party registration from Democrat to Republican in 1984, forcing not only liberals and Democrats but even moderates within the Republican party on the

defensive. This tumult has also altered the climate of judicial interpretation, encouraging everyone to think anew about religion in the modern state, the latitude to be given to deeply felt belief, the power that ought to be granted to the observances of the majority, and the sensitivity of the state to religious minorities and to unbelievers.

What the Framers wrote remains a living document partly because of the desire of the religious right and its allies to promote a certain moral vision. Such Christians have championed state-sanctioned prayer and devotion, a renewed public respect for religious observance and symbols, and the enforcement of prohibitions against what they profess to despise, such as abortion, pornography, homosexuality, promiscuity, and drugs—all of which are often attributed to “secular humanism.” Perhaps an historian, absorbed in the minutes of the last meeting, can contribute to understanding by considering that parchment primarily in its late eighteenth century context and then, more gingerly, discuss its contemporary meaning—which has special relevance for Jews.

Given the fervor of contemporary debates, it is a little surprising to note that the roughly seven thousand words of the Constitution omit the word “God.” Even the Declaration of Independence, drafted eleven years earlier, had referred to “the laws of nature and of nature’s God”; and its signers had pledged not only their lives and their fortunes but their “sacred honor.” But in 1787 those who drafted the Constitution made no mention of a divine being. At the Constitutional convention itself, contrary to one of President Reagan’s claims, the delegates never opened or closed any of their sessions with prayer, never invoked divine guidance in their auspicious attempt to found a new nation. The only mention of religion in the final document appears in Article VI, clause 3, promising those entering political or judicial life that “no religious tests shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.” This avoided the national crisis that struck the British Parliament in the mid-nineteenth century, when a Liberal running from the City of London was elected ten times by his constituents—ten times Lionel Rothschild was refused a seat because he insisted on taking the oath on what the other members called the Old Testament rather than the New. On the eleventh occasion (in 1858), the House of Lords finally relented. Rothschild served for over a decade and a half but never uttered a further word in Parliament.⁸

The American delegates to the Constitutional convention did more than avoid this problem. They did not write into the document any protection of worship, or any establishment of religion, or any dis-establishment of religion, because they regarded any issue pertaining to religion as unrelated to the federal government itself. They did not imagine that the future Congress could exercise any power over religion. The delegates in Philadelphia considered a bill of rights superfluous, since no power to affect

matters of faith had been enumerated to the national government.⁹ Such power belonged to the states, most of which had already formulated protections for such liberties in their own bills of rights (though two states—New Hampshire and North Carolina—imposed religious tests for office until after the Civil War).

Soon thereafter, in order to secure ratification of the new Constitution, a bill of rights was promised and drafted. Only the first two components of the First Amendment need repeating here: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” That brief passage is the source of all the controversy that has swirled for the past two centuries over the rights of the faithful and the faithless. But what do those words mean?

The right wing has offered one rather dubious interpretation. Chief Justice Rehnquist has asserted that this “establishment clause” means only that it “forbade the establishment of a national religion and forbade preference among religious sects or denominations.” This clause, he claimed in 1985, “did not . . . prohibit the federal government from providing non-discriminatory aid to religion.” In the same year attorney general Edwin Meese informed an organization of lawyers that the establishment clause was designed only to prevent Congress from establishing a single national church, and that the government cannot elevate “a particular faith or sect . . . above the rest.” Since the top law enforcement officer in the Reagan administration believed that federal judges should be guided by the original intentions of the Framers, it could be inferred from Meese’s views that government aid to religion, so long as it did not discriminate against any particular creed, would be constitutional. Reagan’s Secretary of Education, William J. Bennett, opposed judicial decisions limiting aid to parochial schools because of a belief that, so long as some of these sectarian schools are not more generously rewarded than others, so long as such aid is equitable, federal assistance is true to the original intent of the First Amendment.¹⁰

Such readings of the Constitution have been used to sanction the political struggle to lower the wall separating church and state—the wall that both Thomas Jefferson and James Madison deemed necessary for the preservation of civil peace, the wall that both Roger Williams and Alexis de Tocqueville surmised would enable religion to flourish. This wall has also generally given religious minorities—especially Jews—the sense of feeling at home in the United States. The only Roman Catholic ever elected to the Presidency had announced during his campaign: “I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute.”¹¹ The religious right has sought to breach that wall, to qualify that absolute, by invoking the doctrine of original intent. And to grapple with the challenge that the New Right has posed, thoughtful citizens must appeal to the historical record, must invite themselves back into the Enlightenment in

order to see what is wrong with the current views of certain judges and politicians and evangelical Christians.

The Talmudic tradition maintains that messianic redemption will be hastened if scholars cite all of their sources.¹² These historical observations may not accelerate the coming of the Messiah. But anyone who looks at the relation between church and state two centuries ago must rely upon the scholarship of Leonard W. Levy, whose many books in Constitutional history provide an authoritative case for rejecting the views of Chief Justice Rehnquist and of those on the religious right who would claim that the original intent of the Framers was merely to ensure that no one sect or denomination would be elevated above the rest. In fact the aim of the First Amendment was broader, and seems daring even from the perspective of our own day. Let me state the proposition emphatically: the Framers did not want to grant any significant government protection to religious expression or observance at all.

The meaning of establishment in Europe, after the Reformation, can be briefly summarized as follows: a state church was generally the church of one denomination, whether Roman Catholic or Lutheran or Anglican. In the American colonies prior to the Revolution, establishment meant more broadly the support of churches (plural) through taxation, but not government-sanctioned preference for a single denomination, as in Europe. Even in Massachusetts, for example, which was founded by Congregationalists, after 1692 all that was legally required of the towns in the Commonwealth was that they maintain an “able, learned and orthodox” minister, whom the voters would choose and who would be supported by the taxes of everyone. Since almost everyone was a Congregationalist, that sect benefitted. But the situation was not uniform, and even the formidable Cotton Mather was forced to concede that whoever could get elected would become “the minister of the place”—even if that clergyman were an Episcopalian. Four of the colonies permitted no establishment at all.¹³ In Rhode Island, Roger Williams and the Baptists famously opposed any governmental interference in questions of conscience.

By about 1790, when the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were ratified, those states that permitted an establishment of religion at all tried to solve the vexing problem of diversity by wishing that government aid would be granted to religion generally, to Christians or more specifically to Protestants, without preference to a particular branch of Christianity or Protestantism. What “establishment” meant in the colonies and states was not the governmental support of a particular denomination, but governmental support of Christianity itself, or of religion generally—even if in practice only some churches, or even one church, might in fact get public revenues. When Congress was forbidden by the First Amendment to pass any law respecting an establishment of religion, those who spoke publicly for ratification did not wish to alter the meaning of “establishment,” nor to

enlarge the scope or power of the national government. When they banned any Congressional act respecting an establishment of religion, the proponents of a Bill of Rights shared an understanding that establishment referred to state support, whether of one church, many churches, Christianity or religion generally, and that Congress lacked jurisdiction in religious matters.

That consensus might well have been affected, in principle, by amendments to the Constitution; and at the first session of the First Congress in 1789, Representative Madison proposed a bill of rights, which included a version of the establishment clause. But conservatives who insist that jurisprudence be founded upon the original intent of the Framers should read the *Annals of Congress* that recorded the debate on Madison's proposals. To do so might violate another provision of the Bill of Rights, the prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment, so please accept as a substitute Professor Levy's summation: "The debate was sometimes irrelevant, usually apathetic and unclear. Ambiguity, brevity, and imprecision in thought and expression characterize the comments of the few members who spoke. That the House [of Representatives] understood the debate, cared deeply about its outcome, or shared a common understanding of the finished amendment seems doubtful." It would be even more difficult for subscribers to the doctrine of original intent to fathom the will of the U. S. Senate, since its debate was conducted in secret; the *Senate Journal* records only the motions and the votes. Interestingly enough the Senate did defeat three motions that would have banned Congress *only* from giving preference to one sect over another. Thus the Framers of the Bill of Rights within the Senate explicitly rejected the narrow sort of definition of "establishment" that Chief Justice Rehnquist and former Attorney General Meese have insisted the Framers accepted.¹⁴

The important point in the light of controversy that the religious right has now triggered is whether the First Amendment permits the national government to aid religion in a nondiscriminatory way. The religious right claims that the First Amendment does permit that aid, that Congress can pass laws in support of religion so long as no single faith or denomination is granted preferential treatment. Because the historical evidence is so spotty, because no collective will or shared motives could be found with any assurance, scholars are bound to disagree over the character of the Constitution. Nine states that ratified the Bill of Rights left *no* record of debates on the First Amendment. The minutes of local chapters of the Cub Scouts are probably better kept than the discussion of the ratification of the First Amendment, which was nominal and quick—occurring within six months. Three of the states (Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Georgia) took a little longer, and did not get around to ratifying the Bill of Rights until 1939, a ceremonious gesture to harmonize with the 150th anniversary of this classic charter of liberty. The debates in Virginia, the thirteenth of the original

states, display little if any evidence of a non-preferentialist or narrow interpretation of the meaning of the establishment clause.¹⁵

What is evident is that the Bill of Rights was never intended to *enlarge* the powers of the national government but rather to limit and *constrain* that government. That is why there is simply no support for Rehnquist's contention that Congress would have a power to do something (like aid religion—even impartially) that no legislator in 1789–90 endorsed.¹⁶ The Enlightenment had already exerted such an impact that perhaps only about four per cent of the population were church members; probably nowhere else in Christendom was religious affiliation so low. Almost half the signers of the Declaration of Independence could be classified as skeptics and deists. It was their misfortune to have been born only once (unlike 41 percent of all Republicans, who told Gallup pollsters in 1992 of having been “born again”). Because the Founders minimized the power of the divinity and maximized the role of reason in human affairs, one colonialist historian has even interpreted the Constitution as “the eighteenth century equivalent of a secular humanist text.”¹⁷ The “party of humanity” that promulgated the first ten Amendments did not want the Ten Commandments to be Government Issue. The First Amendment was intended to restrict Congressional power, not to inflate what had been granted to the legislature under the Constitution drafted two years earlier. There is no documentary evidence that anyone at that convention in Philadelphia in 1787 even conceived that religion fell within the jurisdiction of the Congress.

Or, it might be added, within the purview of the Federal government at all. President Jefferson even refused to proclaim a day of national Thanksgiving because of his belief that such a celebration would collide with the establishment clause. The author of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom would express the hope, in his very last letter, that the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence would be “the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves. . . . All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man.”¹⁸

Such sentiments pose a problem for political and judicial conservatives. In 1984 the Rev. W. A. Criswell of the First Baptist Church of Dallas tried to scorn the wall of separation as “a figment of some infidel's imagination”; and Chief Justice Rehnquist (in *Wallace v. Jaffree*) impugned Jefferson's credentials as a Framer, since he “was of course in France” during passage and ratification of the Bill of Rights.¹⁹ Then what about President Jefferson's immediate successor? Madison even vetoed a land-grant bill, in which Congress tried to remedy a surveying error by giving land to a Baptist church that had been mistakenly built on Federal property, because a bad precedent might be set were a Founding Father like himself to permit “the appropriation of funds of the United States for the use and support of religious societies.” To be sure the

First Congress did create Congressional chaplaincies. Madison himself served on the joint committee that authorized the payment of chaplains. But an 1822 letter insisted that “a favorite principle with me” had been “the immunity of religion from civil jurisdiction. . . . It was not with my approbation, that the deviation from it took place in Congress when they appointed chaplains, to be paid from the national treasury.”²⁰

In fact Madison sounded extremist on the subject of subsidies of interfaith invocations and benedictions, insisting in 1817 that “the establishment of the chaplainship to Congress is a palpable violation of equal rights, as well as of Constitutional principles.” He opposed chaplains for the army and navy as well; he opposed thanksgivings and fast days. For the 1790 census Madison did not even favor the inclusion of clergymen among the enumerated occupations, since the government was enjoined from “interfering, in any manner whatsoever, in matters respecting religion.” His commitment to “perfect separation” was so consistent that he condemned one proposal in the state legislature of Kentucky “to exempt Houses of Worship from taxes.”²¹ No one deserves extra credit for guessing what the statesman most responsible for the Constitution and the Bill of Rights would have thought of the recent Presidential proclamations of Bible reading. How Madison’s ghost must have snickered when President Eisenhower, after urging Americans on the first Fourth of July of his administration to spend the day in prayer and penance, did not practice what he preached. That day, according to journalist Elmer Davis, Ike “caught four fish in the morning, played eighteen holes of golf in the afternoon, and spent the evening playing bridge.”²²

How intense the Framers’ desire was to deny to the government any power over religion can be confirmed by a closer look at the language of the First Amendment, which does not prohibit Congress from passing a law that would *establish* religion (or a religion). Because of the phrase “respecting an establishment of religion,” Congress is prevented from passing a law that would even *pertain* to religion. It is odd that believers in original intent, who have been so closely allied with “strict constructionists,” fudge the precise language of the First Amendment, in which a switch in verbs occurs. That Amendment *prohibits* the Congress from making any law interfering with “the free exercise of religion,” although the legislative branch is prevented merely from *abridging* freedom of speech or of the press. If taken literally, as strict constructionists commonly urge upon judges tempted to impose their own political values, that variation in verbs would mean that Congress might *abridge* the free exercise of religion so long as it did not downright *prohibit* the free exercise of religion.²³ But that is hardly what the fundamentalist allies of fundamentalist readers of the First Amendment would really want judges to do.

The ban on any Congressional act respecting an establishment of religion did not of course apply to the states, nor was its scope so intended.

Congress even repudiated a proposal to impose a similar restriction upon the state governments. In 1868 that situation changed in principle with the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, which prevented any state of the Union from depriving any person of liberty without due process of law. In 1940, in *Cantwell v. Connecticut*, the Supreme Court finally held that, in the Fourteenth Amendment, the definition of liberty included liberty of worship and conscience; and the establishment clause was incorporated into the restrictions imposed upon the states as well as the Congress. In the *Everson* case in 1947, Justice Hugo L. Black held for the majority that “neither a state nor the Federal Government . . . can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another. . . . No tax in any amount, large or small, can be levied to support any religious activities or institutions, whatever they may be called. . . . In the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by laws was intended to erect a ‘wall of separation between Church and State.’”²⁴

On today’s Supreme Court, Justices Rehnquist and Antonin Scalia have tended to spearhead opposition to Black’s understanding of the original intent of Jefferson and Madison. Along with the retired Byron White, they have asserted that government can foster religion, that it need not be neutral between religion and irreligion, or between religion and indifference—*so long as Congress does not prefer one denomination or faith over another*. Even in the *Everson* case, in which Black’s defense of a high wall was so quotable, the Court allowed a New Jersey township to reimburse the parents of children who rode public buses to attend parochial schools. Black was himself part of that majority that saw no breach in the wall that he had so cogently described.

That is an index of how ambiguous is the separation of church and state, and how devilishly complicated the pattern of judicial opinions has become. Contrary to Senator Ervin’s complaint in 1962 that the Supreme Court had evicted God from the basic charter of self-government, that tribunal has found nothing objectionable in having witnesses swear on Bibles when testifying in court, or in the administration of an oath that concludes, “So help me God.” Presidents are inaugurated with the invocations and benedictions of clergymen. The Supreme Court opens its own sessions with the daily invocation, “God save the United States and this honorable Court.” Such practices do not exactly demonstrate neutrality as between religion and irreligion. Though no deity is mentioned in the Constitution, God has been found on our currency since 1864. The fourth stanza of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” which became the national anthem in 1931, contains the line: “And this be our motto, ‘In God is our Trust.’” Ever since the Cold War anathematized the atheistic Communism of the Soviet Union, “under God” was added to the pledge of allegiance. If the Court has ducked the task of ruling on the validity of such symbolic allusions, that may be because they do indeed violate the establishment

clause. But it would be unpopular to say so; and jurists are, at least partly, political animals.²⁵

Beginning in 1971, in an opinion that Chief Justice Warren Burger enunciated in *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, the Supreme Court has sought to evaluate the Constitutionality of any aid whatsoever to religious institutions according to a three-part test. An act or policy can satisfy the First Amendment if it meets the following criteria: 1) the act must have a secular purpose, 2) it must have a major effect that neither advances nor weakens religion, and 3) it must not draw the state into "excessive entanglement" in religion. Part of the problem is that the Justices might well accept the validity of these three principles without agreeing on whether a particular policy or law violates those principles (such as state salary supplements paid to instructors of secular subjects in parochial schools).²⁶ That is why, in cases involving the establishment clause, Justices William J. Brennan and Thurgood Marshall almost always spotted such a violation. For them the Establishment Clause was a sort of eviction notice, kicking clerics out of the public square. Yet Rehnquist and Scalia tend to find that such a law can pass muster, for they have favored governmental accommodation to religion more than a high wall of separation.

The impulse of the religious right to reduce that wall to rubble can be seen in the efforts of "creationists" to impart in the public schools the Biblical account of the origins of humanity. In June 1987, by a 7-2 margin, the Court invalidated the Louisiana legislature's Creationism Act, which required the teaching of "creation science" so long as public schools also proposed to teach evolution. The law, which cleverly omitted any mention of God or of religion, was not subtle enough to sneak past Justice Brennan, who wrote the majority opinion. Because it "advances a religious doctrine," he claimed, the statute "seeks to employ the symbolic and financial resources of the government to achieve a religious purpose." But Rehnquist and Scalia called it Constitutionally permissible for Louisiana to encourage students to make up their own minds, "based upon a fair presentation of the scientific evidence, about the origin of life." Nor did the two dissenters find the *motivation* that instigated the law a decisive reason for invalidating it, since creationism need not be a religious dogma. But the dissenters utterly misconstrued the implications of the majority opinion. Creationism can even now be taught in science classes in Louisiana and elsewhere, *if* there is scientific evidence for it. But the majority of the Court was right to insist that a state cannot *require* that creationism be taught merely because another theory is presented.²⁷

In 1987, Fundamentalists suffered other setbacks in attempting to lower the wall of separation. In a weird case in Alabama, a Federal judge had concurred with Fundamentalist parents that textbooks used in the public schools promoted a religion that the Fundamentalists call "secular humanism." If that is a religion (a categorization that only its foes use), then of course

the establishment clause is violated. But in *Smith v. Board of Commissioners*, an appeals court unanimously overturned the judge's ruling, since the textbooks did not seem to promote any religion at all. If anything, such works underestimated the impact of religion in American history (a serious defect); but many scholars throughout the country breathed more easily, inferring that the assignment of books cannot be illegal just because those books are lousy. In Tennessee, Fundamentalists had objected to the texts that were assigned in public schools, and insisted on the right of their children not to attend discussions of books that promoted such modern notions as evolution and feminism. But an appellate judge in Cincinnati found no evidence that the schools or teachers were compelling pupils to *believe* in the viewpoints ascribed to the "godless" books, which were only to be read and evaluated. "The conduct required of the students," the judge concluded, "was [not] forbidden by their religion."²⁸

The state of Alabama also tried to defy the ruling in *Engel v. Vitale* by compelling pupils in public schools to repeat a state-composed prayer. A one-minute period of silence, which might include meditation or voluntary prayer, was also required, which in 1985 caused the law to be struck down, because the Supreme Court could find no secular purpose in it whatsoever. White, Rehnquist, and Burger nevertheless dissented; and President Reagan protested afterward that "the good Lord who has given our country so much should never have been expelled from our nation's classrooms."²⁹ Neither the President nor the dissenters seem to have understood the distinction between silent meditation—which has always occurred in schools, especially before math tests—and religious exercises that the state has ordered and orchestrated. Pupils can pray anytime in schools. But—so far—the majority of the Court has deemed it unlawful for the state to *organize* prayer, or even out of benevolent motives to intimidate impressionable or vulnerable children for a religious purpose. To them prayer can no more be classified as "voluntary" than "homework, nor discipline, nor even attendance. The legal system . . . hardly recognizes the concept of voluntariness when it comes to children," columnist Charles Krauthammer has noted. Because the Court has noticed the coerciveness of conformity in elementary schools, President Reagan proposed an end run by favoring a Constitutional Amendment that would permit school prayer. But he did not explicitly target the establishment clause, as one of his critics explained. "I do not think that Ronald Reagan wants to establish a state church," Senator Daniel P. Moynihan (D-N. Y.) quipped. "It would require him to attend services more often than he is disposed to do."³⁰ Even Reagan's most pious champions did not complain about his lax church attendance, or challenge the fatuity of his official explanation (which was his concern about terrorism). For what seems salient are public professions of faith—not the privacy of one's own heart—as well as a desire to seem to act upon that faith in the construction of public policy.

One inference that can be drawn from this history lesson is the strength of the American willingness to accept and acknowledge the plurality of faiths (as Huey Long so slyly demonstrated over half a century ago). The stratagem that politicians and judges have devised was generally to pretend to official neutrality, and sometimes indifference. The republic of Holland had demonstrated the benefits of tolerance as early as the seventeenth century, when Spinoza became the first intellectual to envision the uncoupling of church and state. Civilization was enhanced with a truce between religious foes, with a recognition of the advantages of burying the hatchet—some place other than in infidels' skulls.

The Framers of the Constitution went further than the ideal of tolerance, and detoxified the political system of the hatreds that religious faith can engender. For if the pious take their beliefs with utmost seriousness, no compromise is possible. During the Reformation blood was shed between Christians who believed in transubstantiation, and those who insisted instead upon consubstantiation; and both groups could be lethal toward Jews and Muslims as well. But in the United States a spirit of forbearance has generally prevailed, for pluralism means a willingness to spill ink instead of blood, and to de-legitimize those who would not only die for their faith but kill for it as well. Pluralism is therefore an index of historical progress. The Spanish government, which had conquered the Muslims and expelled the Jews in 1492, did not get around to noticing the advantages of complete religious freedom for half a millennium; in 1990, such an accord was signed by Justice Minister Enrique Mugica, the only Jew in the cabinet.³¹

Generally Christians and Jews in the United States have enjoyed autonomy in practicing their faiths; and to the extent that the right wing can still be checked at the polls and on the bench, the state is not supposed to affect the outcome of that practice and observance. As belief-systems claiming validation in divine origins, both Christianity and Judaism, for example, cannot be right. That would be illogical. One or more theologies must ultimately be wrong. But the genius of the American system is that the state cannot serve as referee. Verification can only occur at the end of days, when, as one rabbi has suggested, the Messiah can then be asked if it is a first visit or a return trip. Until that moment of universal peace and harmony, there is bound to be a tension between church and state, so long as religious believers accept the awesome challenges of their faith and so long as the United States is rather less than ideal and east of Eden. There are bound to be collisions, efforts to rearrange the balance.

A conclusion might specify, by picking three clergymen, two wrong ways and one right way for the pious to behave in politics.

A candidate for the Presidential nomination of the Republican Party, the Rev. Marion G. (Pat) Robertson (1930–), has been one of the key preachers in transforming the old-time religion into the prime-time religion.

Though brandishing a law degree, Rev. Robertson has shown a weak grasp of the Constitution, which he has proclaimed “a marvelous document for self-government by a Christian people. But the moment you turn the document over to non-Christian people and atheist people, they can use it to destroy the very foundations of our society. And that’s what’s been happening.” In an interview in *Christian Life* magazine, Robertson spoke of “the duty we have toward the Jewish people in America,” which is “to insist that the Jewish pressure groups desist in their efforts to strip religion from public life in America.” He added that “the liberal Jewish population in America” had to be blocked in its “intent on diminishing Christian influence in the public life in America,” and condemned “Jewish intellectuals and media activists” for “assault[ing] . . . Christianity.” On his *700 Club* Robertson warned that “no society should have to dismantle its entire religious framework to accommodate the one or two percent who are disbelievers.” Note how such conformism imperils the sense of security that religious minorities ought to enjoy, and threatens to smash the wall that even Karl Marx had noticed over a century earlier as invaluable to the survival of Judaism. (Rev. Robertson traced the ideal of separation of church of state to the Soviet constitution rather than to the Framers.) He has proposed a wrong way of resolving the tension between church and state.³²

But religion can also suffer by not being taken seriously enough. The late Reverend Norman Vincent Peale (1898–1993) was among the most influential clergymen of our time. It was he who consecrated the marriage of David Eisenhower and Julie Nixon; and his book *The Power of Positive Thinking* was the leading nonfiction best-seller of the decade of the 1950s, until it was displaced two decades later by a less ethereal volume entitled *The Joy of Sex*. His influence has helped make the United States among the most pious nations in Christendom, exceeded according to most indices only by Ireland. Over 95 percent of the population claims to believe in a personal deity, and two-thirds believe in a life after death. Sixty percent told Gallup pollsters that they believe in Hell, though only 4 percent expected to end up there—a tribute to the national penchant for feelin’-groovy optimism and for the power of positive thinking. But Rev. Peale’s soothing ministrations, gospel of self-help, and individual success never developed a way of speaking truth to power, of resisting or perhaps even recognizing evil. Here his message diverged from the austere demands of, say, early Christianity, as voiced by Saint Paul. Perhaps the comfortable assurances of the Manhattan pastor in part led Adlai Stevenson to claim that he found “Paul appealing and Peale appalling.”³³

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) was far closer to the elusive ideal of realistic challenge to power, which is inevitably subject to abuse and corruption and which therefore requires the constant monitoring of conscience. Niebuhr was the most influential theologian of twentieth century America, and was much honored. Even as he was dying, he could be

outraged by the hypocrisies of certain American politicians. In 1970, when President Nixon's face appeared on television to defend the war in Vietnam, Rev. Niebuhr muttered, "That bastard!" and then explained his rather un-Christian sentiment as follows: "God told us to love our enemies, not to *like* them." No religious figure was more sophisticated in outlining the limits of both church and state; and no one fathomed more insightfully the obligation of religion, if practiced with humility, to be engaged in politics. No one summed up the dilemma of public life more succinctly than Niebuhr when he wrote that "man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."³⁴

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“One, Walking and Studying . . .”: Nature vs. Torah

JEREMY BENSTEIN

רבי יעקב אומר: המהלך בדרך ושונה, ומפסיק למשנתו ואומר: 'מה נאה אין זה, מה נאה
נר זה, מעלה עליו הקדוש כאילו מחזיב בנפשו (פרקי אבות ג:ח).

Rabbi Ya'akov says: One, who while walking along the way, reviewing his studies, breaks off from his study and says, "How beautiful is that tree! How beautiful is that plowed field!" Scripture regards him as if he has forfeited his soul (Ethics of the Fathers, 3:7).

THE ORTHODOX SCHOLAR, MICHAEL WYSCHOGROD, ends his seminal essay, "Judaism and the Sanctification of Nature," with the following thought:

It is difficult to return to the religion of nature. It is difficult and dangerous, particularly for Jews, to worship nature again. At the same time the destruction of nature, which seems to follow to some extent from the desacralization of nature, has reached a stage that cannot continue. So we must try to combine these two themes. To be perfectly honest, I have long felt that the religion against which the prophets expounded so eloquently in the Hebrew Bible did not get a full hearing from them. I wonder whether the prophets gave a really fair representation of the point of view and theology of the worshipers of Baal and Ashteret. . . . Perhaps it would have been better if the prophets had occasionally sat down with them and said, "Tell us how you see the world." Could there be some insights in what they taught which we need to learn? I am convinced there were; and even if we don't agree with much of what they believed, I think we would profit by better understanding their point of view.¹

While one can point to many profound ethical insights regarding the care and stewardship of the natural world in Judaism in particular, and Western monotheistic traditions in general, the desacralization of Nature that followed the rise of monotheism in ancient Israel is arguably one of the roots of our contemporary environmental crisis.² Perhaps for this reason modern environmentalists are so drawn to Nature-worshipping (i.e., pagan) religious traditions for words of inspiration and guidance. The castigation and subsequent fear of paganism in Judaism goes back to Moses and the classical prophets' inveighing against its dangers upon entry into the Land, and

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during first Temple times; it is also a dominant theme in the Jewish reactions to Hellenistic culture, and Greek philosophy, which affirmed the eternity of nature, and denied Divine Creation. Even simple appreciation of God's handiwork in the world could be seen as dangerous, for appreciation could lead to sanctification, and then to deification and worship, which is heresy.

For Jews, the Torah—the revelation of God's will in words—has functioned as the antidote to the risks involved in unmediated experience of Nature. For that reason, the Torah and its study have often been a wedge, distancing us from a direct relationship with the natural world. But while the slippery slope from admiration to deification was understood, the other side of the coin, the danger of desacralization leading to alienation and then to exploitation, and hence devastation, has only become evident in our day.

The proportions of the contemporary environmental crisis should lead us to re-evaluate aspects of our tradition that perhaps have functioned in negative ways, or at least have had unhealthy side-effects. This essay is a modest attempt at such re-evaluation.

Contexts

Being a Jew with strong environmental concerns, one is often led to study the Sources with an eye for those particular teachings that are inspirational for—or at least compatible with—one's own predetermined “green” positions, and thus avoid challenging oneself with texts that don't fit current environmental wisdom. All three sides—Judaism, environmentalism, and ourselves—suffer from this sort of superficial understanding of what it means to learn Torah—or to interact with any age-old wisdom tradition. This essay looks at one of those “tough” traditional texts, one that is seemingly antithetical to any sort of sympathetic portrayal of the natural world, along with the ancient and modern commentaries that show how Jews have grappled with it in different generations, in an attempt to understand what it may be saying to us, in our generation.

The passage has frequently been understood to teach a rejection of the (natural) World, and any appreciation of it, in the face of the supreme—and ultimately, exclusive—value of Torah study. As such, it serves as a central proof-text for the claim that Judaism, at its core, is spiritually alienated from Nature; that Jewish tradition stands squarely behind Revelation (Torah) as its central religious category of experience and source of Truth while Creation (Nature) is seen as a potentially dangerous competitor, as an alternative—and therefore heretical—source of inspiration, or Truth(s), or experience of the Divine, whose seductive charms must be contained, or in this case, vehemently censured.

The text is a saying from that part of the Mishna known as פירקי אבות, *Pirkei Avot*, literally “Chapters of the Fathers,” often translated as “Ethics of the Fathers.” *Avot*, as it is also called, is a collection of ethical maxims and

moral teachings, of a nonlegally binding nature ascribed to the *tannaim*, the sages of the Mishnaic period, who lived roughly from around the turn of the era, until c. 200 C.E. The teaching heads this article, together with a suggested translation. The English version is only one possibility among many, since like most significant ancient sources, it cannot be rendered simply or straightforwardly into modern English. Though the text is not particularly complex or sophisticated in style, any single “literal” translation invariably misses allusions and levels of meaning that not only deepen and enrich our understanding of the original, but also occupied the traditional and modern commentators whose interpretations we also wish to study. Therefore, in order to understand this text more fully, rather than work from a given translation, we will work toward an interpretation, via a close reading of the original, which will be “discussed into English,” to use Robert Frost’s phrase, in an approach inspired by translations of modern poetry.³ This process will both facilitate the introduction of the commentaries (for while it is well known that every translation is, in fact, an interpretation, it is equally true that every interpretation is a translation of sorts) and open up the range of possibilities in the text for our own readings.

The Text

רַבִּי יַעֲקֹב אֵימֹר – *Rabbi Ya’akov [Jacob] says*. . . . The first question we encounter is the attribution of the teaching. Some manuscripts relate this saying in the name of R. Ya’akov, some in the name of R. Shim’on.⁴ This issue is not (just) a pedantic, academic one. It is important to understand this saying—which purportedly denigrates this material World, as compared with the Eternal Torah—in the wider context of the world view of the sage(s) who allegedly uttered it. Rabbi Ya’akov is Ya’akov ben Korshai, a *tanna* (a sage of the mishnaic period) of the fourth generation, who lived in the mid-second century, and was a member of the Sanhedrin at Usha. He was a disciple of Rabbi Meir, a contemporary of Rabban Gamliel II, and was chosen to be the tutor of the young Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi, the redactor of the Mishna, and one of the intellectual leaders of the era.⁵ More important is Ya’akov ben Korshai’s family background: he was the grandson of the (in)famous apostate Elisha ben Abuya, known as *Acher*—“the other.” The very scenario⁶ which was reputed to have caused Elisha ben Abuya to have lost his belief in God and in Divine justice, did not shake the faith of his grandson, Rabbi Ya’akov, for it was his firm belief that the poor child who died, though fulfilling two *mitzvot* which should have guaranteed him long life, would receive his length of days and just rewards in the World to Come. This emphasis on the next world seems to be a central axis of his thought, that ties into our mishna as well. Further along in *Pirke Avot*, he is quoted as saying the following: “This world is like a vestibule (פְּרוּדֹדֶר) to the world to come; prepare yourself in the

vestibule that you may enter into the (banqueting-) hall” (4:16). And: “Better is one hour of bliss of spirit (קורת רוח) in the world to come than all the life of this world.”⁷ It makes sense that our mishna came from the same mouth that spoke these “anti-this-worldly” teachings.

Were Rabbi Shim’on to have originated this saying, though, that too would be fitting. The Rabbi Shim’on in question is none other than Rabbi Shim’on bar Yochai, a contemporary of Rabbi Ya’akov ben Korshai. He was one of the five remaining students of Rabbi Akiva who survived the failure of the Bar Kochba revolt, and himself had to flee the Romans, and eventually hide out in a cave. According to the talmudic account (T. B. Shabbat 33b) he secluded himself, together with his son, for thirteen years, studying Torah day and night. When they finally emerged, they saw people going about their daily affairs, plowing and sowing, and not devoting themselves to Torah. They exclaimed: “מניחין חיי עולם ועוסקים בחיי שעה?” meaning, “they forsake eternal life (i.e., Torah study and its rewards), and devote themselves to temporal life?” When their fiery gazes destroyed all they looked upon, God came to the aid of his Creation and, their passionate devotion to divine Revelation notwithstanding, God rebuked them: “Have you emerged only to destroy My World? Return to your cave!”⁸ Elsewhere, in a dispute about the value of labor, Rabbi Shim’on said: “If a person ploughs in the ploughing season, and sows in the sowing season, and reaps in the reaping season, and threshes in the threshing season, and winnows in the season of wind, what is to become of the Torah?”⁹ For Rabbi Shim’on, Torah is an all-consuming and exclusive passion; any diversion, such as taking care of one’s physical needs (here, significantly, represented by agriculture, i.e., work in nature) is a subversion, and must be fought. His “anti-this-worldliness” stems from considerations very different from those of Rabbi Ya’akov’s, but our mishna from *Pirke Avot* dovetails with his value-system as well.

The above are just the briefest of thumbnail sketches of the sages involved and their beliefs, but hopefully they serve to add some background, or flavor, to the saying under discussion. In the end, we relate to a teaching on the basis of its content, not on the basis of who it was who taught it, but it is important (where possible) to be aware of the larger intellectual context of the “life and times” of the relevant thinker(s), and the interrelationships among their ideas and values. When this is ignored, or de-emphasized, as is all too often the case, it is easy to forget that a given statement or teaching is the single voice of a particular sage, one view among many. A major point of this essay is to argue (by example) for taking voices like the one represented by this mishna seriously because they are *part of* Jewish tradition—but not because they *are* (the whole of) Judaism. One need look no further than sections of the book of Psalms, or Job, to discover other voices that speak about Nature in very different terms from

these. Part of the richness of Judaism—and the excitement of Jewish learning—is the ongoing dialogue between the frequently very disparate voices of that tradition, a dialogue which we shall soon see continues through to the present day.

הַמְדִּילֵךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ – *the walker on the road; he who walks by the way . . .* Two things are evident here: the mishna is referring to an individual (not a group), and that person is out of doors, and in transit from one place to another. A good example of a talmudic-style question that some commentators ask is: is this choice of phrasing *be-davka*? That is to say, is the mishna referring *specifically* to an individual on the road, and therefore excluding a similar occurrence that might happen to someone sitting under a tree, or at home? Or is this just meant to be a general example, and apply in any situation? Several answers are discussed below.

The other important thing to note is the clear allusion to the Biblical verse (Deut. 6:7): “וְשִׁנַּנְתֶּם לְבָנֵיכֶם וּדְבַרְתֶּם בָּם . . . וּבִלְכַתְּכֶם בְּדֶרֶךְ . . .” – “and you shall repeat them [these words] to your children, and speak of them . . . when you walk along the way. . . .” If this verse directly underlies our mishna, then the “peripatetic student” is not just engaging in a rather unusual pastime, he is actually fulfilling a mitzva.

וְשׁוֹרֵה – *and is studying; while reviewing his studies; repeating [his Torah tradition].*¹⁰ This verb is from the same root as שֵׁנִי, שְׁנִי – “two, second,” that is, to do something a second time, to repeat. It is predicated specifically of oral review or verbal rote learning.¹¹ The use of this single, particular word gives us a very concrete image, perhaps different from what we imagined at first: our traveling learner is not walking around absentmindedly with his nose in a book, but rather taking advantage of some quiet time alone to go over what he has learnt, what he is trying to memorize—and very possibly fulfilling a mitzva as well. There is some discussion as to what is permissible subject matter for the road, even whether it is advisable to study while traveling at all. The conclusion in B. T. Ta’anit 10b is that rote repetition (מִיגְרָס) is acceptable for wayfarers, but “deep thought” or analysis (עֵינִי) is potentially dangerous. The danger in excessive engrossment in one’s studies is not being alert to physical risks (of attack or mishap) or simply losing one’s way. The “danger” in being diverted *from one’s studies*—by what one sees along the way—well, that’s the subject of our mishna. But this particular word makes it clear that the literal risk is not so much losing one’s train of thought, as actually forgetting the Torah that one is trying to learn.

מִפְסִיק מִמְשַׁנְתּוֹ וְאוֹמֵר – *and ceases his repetition; breaks off his study; interrupts his learning and says . . .* The strong terminology here seems to imply that this interruption is not a momentary lapse of attention, but a complete shift in the activity and mental state of the subject. The late chief rabbi of England, Rabbi J. H. Hertz, who seems rather ill at ease with the

mishna as a whole in his commentary, interprets these words to mean: “What is deprecated here is a willful distraction of the mind from Torah-meditation by the surrounding scenery.”¹²

“מִהַ נֶאֱדָה אֵילָן זֶה” – “*How beautiful, or fine, is this tree!*” The appreciation expressed here seems to be clearly of an aesthetic nature.¹³ Many commentators have pointed out that there is a prescribed blessing that is to be recited at the sight of beautiful creatures (בריות טובות) and beautiful trees (אילנות טובות), from T. B. Berachot 58b: בְּרוּךְ הוּא שֶׁכָּכָה לוֹ בְּעוֹלָמוֹ – “Blessed is the One whose world is thus.”¹⁴ Some claim, therefore, that the person who uttered these words was therefore engaging in an essentially praiseworthy activity, of praising God’s creation; while others point out that since the phrase here is not the מַטְבַּע בְּרַכָּה, the set text of the blessing, as prescribed, the subject here is expressing illegitimate (possibly heretical, at least frivolous) aesthetic expression, that is, not divinely-oriented. This will be expanded upon below.

“מִהַ נֶאֱדָה נִיר זֶה” – “*How beautiful, or fine, is this furrow; this plowed field.*” While many translations have simply “field,” this is inaccurate. As Rashi correctly points out, a נִיר is not a שָׂדֶה, a field, it is a שָׂדֶה שֶׁנֶּחְרַשׁ, a field that has been plowed, and made ready for cultivation (see Jeremiah 4:3). This pinpoints the scene described in the mishna once again: the student is not hiking through deep woods, but rather is walking along a country road, through farmland, apparently before the planting. It is reasonable to assume that it is springtime, which would mean the aforementioned tree is probably in bud (making it particularly attractive) – whether wild, or part of someone’s orchard, as now seems likely.

It is also important to note that a furrow is a distinctly human creation, in contrast to the tree. Some commentators make much of this point – the divine creation together with the human.¹⁵ Others point out that while there is a blessing for the tree (even if our wayfarer only alluded to it, but didn’t actually recite it), there is none prescribed for seeing a plowed field, no matter how attractive.

מִטְעֵלָה נֶאֱדָה הַכְּתוּב – *Scripture accounts it to him, regards him, [such a person] is considered by the Torah . . .* This is another problematic part of our text. Invariably a formulation such as this is accompanied by a proof-text, a verse cited to justify the conclusion: “Scripture *regards* him . . .” But no verse is included here. Rashi claims that that is strong enough evidence to doubt the actual phrasing of the mishna; some versions¹⁶ in fact do omit the word הַכְּתוּב – “Scripture,” which results in: “this person is regarded as . . .” Commentators have taken differing tacks: Herford wrote “it is hard to imagine what text would support such a thesis”;¹⁷ likewise Hertz: “No text is, or could well be, quoted in support of this teaching.”¹⁸ But earlier than either of them, the authors of the Machzor Vitry, a prayer book composed in eleventh to twelfth century France by followers of Rashi, commented that there are a

number of likely candidates: Proverbs 6:22, “when you walk it will lead you”; the verse quoted above, Deut 6:7, “. . . when you walk along the way . . .” and also Deut 4:9, “take utmost care, and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes. . . .”¹⁹ None of these verses is quite virulent enough, though, to justify the harsh “judgment” that follows.

כְּאִילוּ מִתְחַיֵּב בְּנַפְשׁוֹ – *It is as if he . . .* Here we truly run into translation difficulties. A survey of a dozen editions yields more than ten different renderings. The range of possibilities includes: “were mortally guilty,”²⁰ “sinned against his own soul,”²¹ “committed a capital offense,”²² “were guilty against his own soul,”²³ “were guilty against himself,”²⁴ “has become liable for his life,”²⁵ “were ‘guilty of death,’ ”²⁶ “had incurred guilt [expiable] by his life,”²⁷ “has forfeited his soul (life),”²⁸ “were guilty of deadly sin,”²⁹ “(has) hurt his own being.”³⁰ This listing is somewhat random—there are undoubtedly other permutations and nuances that are possible.

There are two main difficulties in this three-word phrase, and they are related. The first is the significance of the modifier כְּאִילוּ – “as if.” In a previous mishna (3:5) we are told that one who stays awake (or awakens) at night, or travels alone, or turns his heart to idle matters, that person has [actually] מִתְחַיֵּב בְּנַפְשׁוֹ (choose one of the alternatives above). Why the difference? Why is the “punishment” (or judgment) for this apparent sin only “as if”? Is it less serious?³¹ Are there mitigating circumstances? The other obvious difficulty is trying to figure out exactly what that judgment is. לְהִתְחַיֵּב is “to become, or to be found, guilty” (connected to חָיִיב, חֹב), and by extension, “to sin (with respect to).” נַפֵּשׁ of course is “soul,” but in premodern Hebrew it also refers simply to “self.” In the rest of the Mishna (outside of *Pirke Avot*), the phrase occurs in three other places,³² all of them in a strictly legal context. All have the force of “receive the death penalty,” hence also the rendering here “guilty of a capital offense,” that is, worthy of death. But interpreting the guilt, or the risk (or the damage) involved as *physical* harm seems excessively literal; perhaps this should be understood on a spiritual plane.³³ The modifying כְּאִילוּ – “as if” certainly reinforces this (but in 3:5, without the modifier, the implication seems just as clearly metaphoric—nobody has been sentenced to death for insomnia, or for a penchant for solo travel!).³⁴ Therefore, in order to express the spiritual nature of the statement, but also retain the legalistic sense of punishment (or loss), the translation “has forfeited his soul” will be used.

This, then, is our reconstructed text:

Rabbi Ya’akov says: One, who while walking along the way, reviewing his studies, breaks off from his study and says, “How beautiful is that tree! How beautiful is that plowed field!” Scripture regards him as if he has forfeited his soul.

Now, what do the commentaries have to say about it?

The Commentaries

Commentators over the centuries have responded to a wide range of issues connected to our mishna, many of which are beyond the scope of this essay. The focus in the following selections will be the question of the relationship of Nature and its appreciation to Torah study and religious experience. It is important to note, however, that certain commentators did not see this as the central issue at all. For example, Shim'on ben Tzemach Duran (Spain, 1361–1444) wrote in his commentary *Magen Avot*:

And although in our passage the Sages speak specifically of the exclamation, “How handsome is this tree, how handsome this field!”—the same is true of any other chatter (שיחה בטלה). But the Sage is referring to something commonplace, for it is customary for those who walk on the highway to talk of what they see along the way.³⁵

Of course, the fact that Duran refers to verbal appreciation of nature as “chatter” (lit. useless or wasted speech) is significant to our discussion, and would place him in line with the views of Meiri and Abarbanel described below.

Most, however, did relate specifically to the issue of Torah and Nature. Regarding the question, we can discern three broad approaches in the classical and contemporary traditional commentaries.³⁶ All in some way “justify” the mishna: that is to say, interpret the text in such a way so as to extract a message that is acceptable (to them). None reject or negate the passage (as the Zionist Berdichevski did—see below). The differences appear in how they relate to Nature per se. The first is complete subordination—to the point of denigration—of the value of Nature, and of appreciation for the works of Creation—in the face of the supremacy of Revelation—and the study of Torah. Meiri (Menahem ben Solomon HaMeiri, France, 1249–1306) considers such appreciation “vain” and “idle”:

The reason for such strong condemnation is this: by [his] nature man is drawn to vanity (הבלים) and idle matters (שיחה בטלות); [if he does not resist his nature] he will be drawn on from such habits to throwing off the yoke of the Torah completely.³⁷

And Don Isaac Abarbanel, the great fifteenth-century Spanish commentator, writes in his commentary *Nachalat Avot* that material concerns such as this are “useless”:

When a person who was walking along the way, and reviewing his studies, stopped his studying in order to pay attention to things that are of no use (אין בהם תועלת), then he forfeits his soul, because he ceased his study, and made it secondary, peripheral (טפל) and made the other worldly, material things (הדברים הגשמיים) central (עיקר).

A second, more moderate—and more prevalent—approach also sees the acts of Creation as subordinate to the words of Revelation, but

recognizes the act of appreciation of those acts, praising God for the divine handiwork,³⁸ as correct and valuable in itself, but still not as important as Torah study. Representatives of this approach among traditional commentators are Bertinoro (Obadiah ben Abraham Bertinoro, Italy, 1470–1520):

And there are those who say that this (particular example) teaches us something significant, that despite the fact that he would be brought to recite a blessing—“Blessed is the One who has such [beauty] in His world”—nevertheless, he is accounted as if he forfeited his life, since he ceased his studying.

And Rabbi Yitzchak Magriso, in the *Me'am Loez*, an eighteenth-century Ladino anthology of commentary and stories:

The case which he is discussing is not that of a person who puts aside his studies merely to engage in useless chatter, but to praise God for the beautiful tree that he saw. Nonetheless, since this person has stopped studying, it is counted as if he were engaging in useless speech, and it is considered a sin. What one should do under the circumstances is complete the subject of his study, and then praise God for the beautiful sight. From this one can see how great is the sin of interrupting one's studies, since even praising God is considered a waste of time. How much greater is the sin of abandoning one's studies without good reason, for a real waste of time.³⁹

Modern commentators have also adopted this approach, which seems to afford a comfortable “middle road,” by allowing affirmation of the World, without denying the traditional primacy of Torah study. Reuven Bulka develops this point at length:

If, as has been posited in the previous *mishna*, all is God's, this would include the heavens and the earth, nature, the trees, the fields. One can see in all of this the greatness and majesty of God. Nevertheless, this should not develop into an equation of sameness. There is profound significance in everything, but not everything is the same. There is a scale of values; there are priorities and levels of importance. One who is walking by the way in study and interrupts the study to admire nature by saying “*How beautiful is this tree !*” or another such statement which affirms the majesty of God in the world, has made a priority substitution which is distorted. This distortion inheres in that such an individual has seen fit to interrupt Torah study to admire nature. Admiring nature is part of appreciating the beauty of the world, but not a priority when juxtaposed with Torah study. Nature is God's work, but the Torah is God's formula for life. Interrupting Torah to admire nature is a value distortion.

The *mishna* ends by saying that the individual who makes the value distortion *is regarded by Scripture as having forfeited one's soul*. It is unclear which verse in Scripture is the proof text for this. In all probability, it would seem that Scripture in general makes this observation. It is in the very nature of the importance of Scripture. One who denies Scripture's importance by placing primacy on nature, by interrupting Torah meditation to admire nature, Scripture itself sees this as a rejection of the very notion of Scripture's being

so vital to life, and being the most crucial of all human pursuits. Placing this pursuit in a subordinate position to admiring nature denies the primary importance of Scripture. It is as if one has forfeited one's soul, because in the process of placing Torah and its values in a secondary position, one has denied its essentiality to life and has thus compromised the value actualization which is so vital for a meaningful life.⁴⁰

A third approach, very different from the first two, can be seen in the commentary of Rabbi Yosef Hayyim Caro (1800–1895, Eastern Europe). Though unswervingly orthodox—he studied under the great halachist, Rabbi Akiva Eiger, Caro had some familiarity with German literature, and was also a proponent of Jewish settlement in Palestine. His commentary is strikingly original, and will be presented and discussed in detail.⁴¹ He begins by formulating the questions that strike him as most troubling, and to which he plans to respond:

The commentators have had great difficulty in interpreting this mishna: why should one forfeit his life in saying “*how fine is . . . etc.*”? If it is because he ceased from his studies, then it should have been phrased simply “he who was studying, and stops his study, it is accounted to him . . . etc.” And also—what is the meaning of the [apparently extraneous] *walking by the way*? Is it permissible then to break off one's studies in one's house?

Clearly, the element of being out of doors, and the specific remark about trees and fields is not accidental, and requires addressing. He goes on to explain how he feels that one can know God through natural events:

It seems to me, that Rabbi Jacob's words refer to the following—There are certain people who know the Blessed Creator through His amazing creations, as in “The heavens declare Your Glory, O God” (Ps. 19). And it is not only in the high heavens that one can discern the actions of the Creator, but also in the seed in the ground, and in the fruit of the tree, that grows in the field, in the lowly mosses that can be seen growing on walls, all the way to the mighty, lofty cedars of Lebanon, because all these express the might of God, and His wonders. . . .

All of Nature—not just the “celestial fireworks”—bears close scrutiny, for it all is indicative of divine action, and instructive regarding God. His next move is far more radical:

And were it not for the danger of failure, this way would be the superior one. Not only that, but all the miracles and wonders through which the Holy Blessed One makes known His might and glory, were created solely for the people who have not reached this spiritual level of knowledge of the Creator, and they are the vast majority, but for those few whose eyes are open to see the wonders of Nature, these enlightened ones will observe, and reflect, and come to know the wonders of God through the usual order of natural processes. . . . For from these can be seen that everything has been established in wisdom, understanding and knowledge, and they can sense in

their souls that this is the work of a wisdom that far surpasses any idea or concept [of ours], and this is our transcendent Creator; but people are fools, for everything that seems to them the usual course of nature, they will pay no attention to—"they have eyes, but will not see"—unless God creates something totally *new* upon the earth, then they will hop and skip like a ram, on the hind legs of their reason, saying: "Look! Now surely Hashem is God!" Like at the Red Sea, which was a sign for the rebellious among them, that they should believe in God, whereas the insightful sage will say, aren't these great waters which have been flowing for thousands of years a greater testament to the might of their Maker? As King David wrote (Ps. 93:4): "from the crash of great waters, the mighty breakers of the sea, The Lord on high is awesome." What could the miracle of those waters drying up for a few hours at God's command, possibly add to that?

Those fancy Biblical miracles—they are for the spiritually shortsighted. The vast majority of people considers those extraordinary events to be proof of God's acting in the world—and needs them, to believe that—while all around them, every day, occur miracles of far greater magnitude, to which they are blind! Those miracles are "invisible" to us because they do not stand out against the background of the natural order—they *are* the natural order. And that order testifies "more faithfully to the power and glory of the Blessed Creator, than all that He did against Pharaoh and his armies." Were it not for a certain (theological) danger, which will be outlined presently, this way, of the study and experience of Nature, would be superior even to Torah study. Caro continues:

If people's consciousness were fuller, they should know their Creator from the wonder of His creatures, and His acts, but in truth, judging from human nature, this is not the case, for the people's discernment is insufficient to consider and understand the complete significance of those things to which they have become accustomed. . . . Even though in truth it were better for us to strive to know God through the wonders of nature, in any event, were the weakness of our understanding not enough, whoever depended solely on this route, is in danger of stumbling, and falling into the trap of denying the belief in a Creation at all, and other true beliefs; therefore, the remarks of the Torah, which tell of the wonders of the Creator in upsetting the natural order, are necessary and fitting, according to our temperament and characteristics, and also safer, and prevent us from [falling into] stumbling and transgression, as we wrote in a previous work for Jewish children: "the words of the Living God are more trustworthy than the testimony of earth and heaven."

Here Caro "retreats" slightly, and begins to lay the groundwork for explaining why our mishna is not in fact mistaken in warning *against* the dependence on Nature for religious inspiration. The idea that God created the World is not something that can be deduced from our experience of it, he claims. It is equally reasonable to assume that the World is eternal, and uncreated—a

belief held by the ancient Greeks, and considered heinously heretical by the rabbis. In order for us to understand what we are looking at, we need God's Torah as an interpretive guide. That goes for the sage, as well, who unlike the masses of close-minded people, does discern the wondrous nature of all that goes on in the environment—but the natural order, however much appreciated, does not interpret itself.

Caro now turns to the text of the mishna itself, and interprets its particular message:

This, then, is the meaning of the words of R. Jacob in our mishna, *he who walks by the way*, that is to say, that he walks the Way of Goodness, to achieve the object of his desire in knowing God, and establishing in his heart the love and fear of God; and *he was learning, and he breaks off his learning, and says "how fine is this tree, etc."* i.e., he ceases his Torah study, saying that we have no need for it to achieve this goal, but rather [knowledge and love of God can be achieved] through correct observation of the beauty of the natural order and its creation, he, then, *would forfeit his soul*, for what could be easier than that he should succumb to the disease of heresy, as described above, and he himself would be the guilty party, for he left the Source of Living Waters, our Holy Torah, which comprised his learning according to what human reason is capable of, and to what he is accustomed. . . .

And in saying "*Scripture accounts it to him . . .*," the mishnaic sage was no doubt referring to the verse [Deut 4:9, quoted in the following mishna]: "Take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes . . ." in which our Holy Torah warns us to remember the day of the receiving of the Torah, such that we worship God from this perspective, and not from the perspective of the structures of nature. For nature is always visibly present, and it is difficult to imagine forgetting it, but the revelation of the Torah at Sinai, it is only too possible for human beings to forget, and so it is about this that we were warned. Understand this . . .

We were instructed about [the importance of] learning, and the testimony of the Torah, so that we don't rely exclusively on the testimony of Nature alone.

So Nature is neither useless, nor peripheral; it is clearly on a par with Torah, in the potential it has as a means for reaching God, but it is unfortunately less trustworthy, and needs to be backed up by, or placed within the framework of, divine truth as revealed in the Torah. Torah as Revelation, though, can be forgotten—therefore it requires special attention and care. Nature, on the other hand, is always "out there," Caro claims, and is less in need of human focus to avoid being forgotten. This contradicts in part what he wrote previously, for the inability of masses of people to appreciate the significance of what is always in front of their eyes is certainly a type of forgetting. And the fiery Zionist ideologue Micha Yosef Berdichevski, while admiring many of Caro's sentiments, would certainly disagree with his conclusion.

Modern & Zionist Responses

Before we turn to Berdichevski and other interpretations inspired by Zionist ideals, it is worthwhile to make mention of three other, very different modern opinions. In his essay, "The Unnatural Jew," the late Prof. Steven Schwarzschild claims not only that yes, Jews have been alienated from Nature over the centuries, but that this is *good*. "The main line of Jewish philosophy (in the exilic age) has paradigmatically defined Jewishness as alienation from and confrontation with nature." Any other approach, such as pagan ontologism or Greek-inspired Christian incarnationism "results in human and historical submission to what are acclaimed as 'natural forces.'" Anything which smacks of immanentism—from Spinoza and Marx to kabbala and Zionism—is a "specifically Jewish heresy." Zionism in particular is classed as pagan and non-Jewish, in what he derisively refers to as the "back-to-nature thrust [which] inheres in the Zionist enterprise." It is no surprise, therefore, to find that our mishna is Schwarzschild's "favorite text." For him, Rabbi Ya'akov represents a positive and candid statement of mainstream Jewish dogma.⁴²

For the sociologist Eric Hoffer, on the other hand, Rabbi Ya'akov is only one of a long line of fanatics in the history of the human race, who are characterized by dangerously blind, single-minded devotion to a cause. In his classic study of religious and political dogmas and their fanatical adherents, *The True Believer*, Hoffer cites our mishna, along with the example of the medieval monk and crusader, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who would pace around beautiful Lake Geneva, lost in thought—never seeing the lake. Hoffer writes:

The fanatic's disdain for the present blinds him to the complexity and uniqueness of life. . . . In *Refinement of the Arts*, David Hume tells of the monk "who, because the windows of his cell opened upon a noble prospect, made a covenant with his eyes never to turn that way." The blindness of the fanatic is a source of strength . . . but it is the cause of intellectual sterility and emotional monotony.⁴³

For Hoffer, it is partly the fanatically exclusive allegiance to an ideology which he finds repugnant; but it is also specifically that such devotion alienates the "true believer" from the breadth and richness of the world, and it is no coincidence that his examples are drawn from expressions of being cut off from the natural world in particular.

A particularly compelling literary treatment of our text is provided by Cynthia Ozick in her short story "The Pagan Rabbi." The mishnaic quote serves as the epigraph, and, as the title alludes, the story revolves around a rabbinic scholar, Isaac Kornfeld, who progressively forsakes his talmudic studies for an ever-deepening fascination with Nature, culminating in a love affair with a nymph. His romantic attachment to this creature leads to the

separation of his soul from his body, and after that, his suicide. From the suicide note passed on to the widowed *rebbetzin*, we gather snippets of the source of his heresy. “There is nothing that is Dead. There is no Non-life. Holy life subsists even in the stone, even in the bones of dead dogs and dead men. Hence in God’s fecundating Creation there is no possibility of Idolatry, and therefore no possibility of committing this so-called abomination.” This is pagan immanentism, by all accounts, and the “abomination,” the coupling of his “in-dwelling” soul with the free-roaming dryad, leads to his soul being “snatched straight from (his) frame.” She then sends him to confront his soul, which appears to him in the form of an ugly old man, trudging down the road bent over under the burden of a dusty bag stuffed with ancient books. He reads as he goes, “he reads the Law and breathes the dust and doesn’t see the flowers . . .” He explains: “I will walk here alone, always, in my garden’—he scratched on his page—‘with my precious birds’—he scratched at the letters—‘and my darling trees’—he scratched at the tall side-column of commentary.”⁴⁴ Ozick’s treatment, as an expansion and commentary on our mishna, reinforces the dichotomizing of Jew and pagan, presenting the soul of the Jew as eternally, irredeemably, book-bound. Though thoroughly repulsed by his own soul—and the image is repulsive in its extremity—the rabbi can only break free from it through suicide. A classical Zionist would see in this character description the height of the *galuti* Jew: that repugnant, “exilic” type of Judaism. It is to the Zionist readings that we now turn.

Three approaches—in the form of explicit interpretations of this mishna—have been expressed in the context of Zionism, the Jewish national return to the Land of Israel. As one might expect, classical Zionist thought, which represented both a secular-political critique of Diaspora religiosity, seen to be desiccated and overly intellectualized, and an affirmation of the renewed connection with the Land, would have a problem with a teaching such as Rabbi Ya’akov’s.

The most extreme reaction is undoubtedly that of Micha Yosef Berdichevski, who later took the name Bin Gurion. Berdichevski was born in Russia, in 1865, to a family of distinguished rabbinic lineage. He was soon a recognized scholar in all branches of traditional Jewish learning, including Talmud, Kabbala, and Chassidism. But like many of his generation, the *Haskala* (enlightenment) and the world of secular learning beckoned him. In 1890 he moved to Western Europe, and deepened his exposure to the intellectual currents of the time. He was deeply influenced by Nietzsche, and the latter’s call for “a transvaluation of all values” in culture. When it came to the Jewish tradition, he had a love-hate relationship, and in his writings “he saw only tension and affirmed only revolt.”⁴⁵ He certainly expressed that Nietzschean idea in his writings on Judaism (a radical secular Zionist had a lot to “transvalue” in Jewish Europe at the turn of the century), but the love-hate ambiguity is also very present in his style. Arthur Hertzberg uses King

James cadences in his translation in order to capture Berdichevski's luxuriant Biblical language in this paean to nature, which nevertheless does not negate or exclude God:

The Universe telleth the glory of God, the works of His hand doth Nature relate; for Nature is the father of all life and the source of all life; Nature is the fount of all, the fount and soul of all that live. . . . And then Israel sang the song of the Universe and of Nature, the song of heaven and earth and all their host, the song of the sea and the fullness thereof, the song of the hills and the high places, the song of the trees and the grass, the song of the seas and the streams. Then did the men of Israel sit each under his vine or his fig tree, the fig put forth her buds and the green hills cast their charm from afar. . . . Those days were the days of breadth and beauty. . . . We had thought that God was power, exaltation, the loftiest of the lofty. We had thought that all that walked upon the heights became a vehicle for His presence, but lo! a day came in which we learned otherwise. . . .

That day was the beginning of the otherworldly, Diaspora mentality that prized ethereal spirituality over all else. The value of political sovereignty, a deep relationship with one's natural surroundings, national pride—all these fell by the wayside.

Is it any wonder that there arose among us generation after generation despising Nature, who thought of all God's marvels as superfluous trivialities?

Is it surprising that we became a non-people, a non-nation—non-people indeed?

I recall from the teaching of the sages: Whoever walks by the way and interrupts his study to remark, How fine is that tree, how fine is that field—forfeits his life!

But I assert that then alone will Judah and Israel be saved, when another teaching is given unto us, namely: Whoever walks by the way and sees a fine tree and a fine field and a fine sky and leaves them to think on other thoughts—that man is like one who forfeits his life!

Give us back our fine trees and fine fields! Give us back the Universe.⁴⁶

Like many Zionists, even in his absolute rejection of them, Berdichevski remains tied to the texts, and the categories of their thought, which formed his identity. He is claiming here that Zionism can only be fulfilled when we not only reject the implications of Rabbi Ya'akov's teaching, but when we adopt the exact opposite outlook. If the tradition gives primacy to Torah study over Nature, then we must reverse the priorities, and make our relationship with the World—in all its manifestations—central, and relegate Torah study to the spiritual backseat, if we validate it at all. If we take his reading at face value, he seems to be claiming that the Land can replace the Book as the Jewish people's prime source of sustenance, of identity, and existence. According to Hertzberg, Berdichevski asserted that "nature worship and idolatry, not biblical monotheism, had

been the real religion of ancient Israel in its days of glory.”⁴⁷ Other Zionist thinkers and writers, notably the poet Saul Tchernichovski, were sympathetic to this quasi-pagan approach.

Another Zionist understanding of our mishna is provided by Ahad Ha'am and Chayim N. Bialik. They were of the same generation as Berdichevski, but did not call for a radical rejection of all things Jewish.⁴⁸ Instead they worked for a secular rejuvenation of Jewish culture, based on the renewed study, and reinterpretation of our age-old Sources. They also believed that a new relationship between Torah and Nature would have to be forged in the rebuilt Jewish society in the Land of Israel. But rather than rejecting, or inverting the teaching of our mishna, as Berdichevski had done, they *contextualized* it, making it a teaching that was crucial for our years wandering in the Diaspora, but now was in need of revision. Bialik wrote the following in his seminal essay “Halacha and Aggada,” attributing the idea to Ahad Ha'am:

It is not without significance that the people of Israel, or at least the great majority of them, submitted to the iron yoke of Halachah, and not only that, but actually chose to carry with them into exile a heavy load of laws and ordinances. . . . And here is what the Halachist himself says: “If a man studies as he walks, and breaks off his study to say ‘How lovely is this tree! How lovely is this field!’—Scripture regards him as guilty of deadly sin.” Our aestheticists have spent all their ammunition on this unfortunate mishnah: but even here the sympathetic ear will detect, between the lines, the apprehension, the trembling anxiety for the future, of a wandering people which has nothing to call its own but a Book, and for which any attachment of its soul to one of the lands of sojourn means mortal danger.⁴⁹

So long as the Jews were in lands other than their own Land of Israel, “walking the roads of Exile,” connected not to a real homeland, but to their “portable homeland,” as Heine characterized the relationship of the Jews to Torah, then, yes, rejecting that spiritual inheritance for the sake of a tenuous connection with “one of the lands of their sojourn” is potentially spiritual suicide. So, according to Bialik and Ahad Ha'am, this mishna is not talking about all of Nature—only Diaspora Nature.⁵⁰ Only that sort of diversion presents a spiritual threat. And it follows that once the Jews return to their land, a new balance can be struck, which can validate both sides of the equation, with neither suffering at the hands of the other. The Land—a metonym of all of Creation, but also the special portion of the Jewish people—would take its place alongside the Book.

Conclusion: A New Vision

What is that new balance, and how is it to come about? A complete answer to that question has yet to be worked out—for as the Jerusalem educator Moti Bar-Or has remarked, the Jewish people may have begun to make *aliyah* to

the Land of Israel, but the Torah has not yet made *aliyah*, has not yet resettled in the Land. In Israel, the Abraham Joshua Heschel Center for Nature Studies has been founded to work out the implications of a Jewishly rooted approach to the natural environment, and to do educational work in this area. We believe this to be of particular concern in the Zionist context of the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel, our own particular piece of the natural world; but making our relationship to the World an item on the Jewish educational agenda should be a priority in the Diaspora as well.⁵¹ Ecological concerns are thankfully becoming more prevalent among many sectors of the population, especially youth. Exploring in a deep and sophisticated way the relevancy of Jewish learning to students' deepest personal concerns can only help revitalize Jewish education, and on the other side, give environmentalism significant spiritual roots that can help make it an integral part of our world view, and not relegate it to the status of a passing fad.

A Jewish environmental ethic should be based on the sense of responsibility that flows from our awe at the wonders of Creation. Regarding responsibility, traditional Jewish teaching has focused on *מצוות בין אדם לחברו*, *bein adam le-chavero*, the (ethical) commandments concerning our duties to our fellow human beings, and *בין אדם למקום*, *bein adam le-Makom*, the (primarily ritual) commandments which help express our relationship to God.⁵² What is needed today is a new, third category: *מצוות בין אדם לעולם*, *bein adam le-olamo*,⁵³ the *mitzvot*, and the concomitant sense of commandedness, which can inform and define our place in the World, and our responsibility towards it. These commandments bridge, and transcend, the traditional categories of ethics and ritual. The *mitzva* of *בל תשחית*, *bal tashchit*, the prohibition of inappropriate use and excessive consumption, is not a ritual, but neither is it ethically directed at the welfare of other human beings. Similarly, shabbat and kashrut are conventionally considered ritual commandments, yet have significant environmental implications. Once we have a name for something, then we can begin to talk about it on, and in, its own terms.

To this end, Jewish teachers need to learn how to integrate interaction with the natural world, and religious thinking about it, into educational experiences which until now have been classroom-bound, and limited to what can be printed between the covers of a book (or with more creativity and funding—on disk or cassette). We need to reinterpret that other potentially antienvironmental *Pirkei Avot* text, the saying attributed to Ben Bag-Bag (5:24): “דפך בה והפך בה דכלא בה” – “Study it [the Torah], and review it, for *everything* is contained within it.” The prevalence of this perspective has made us blind to all those things which are not contained in the books—as wide and deep and rich as our vast sacred bibliography is. Jewish summer camping has great potential, though too often stunning natural camp settings are treated as no more than static props, or scenery

against which the otherwise unaffected drama of camp life takes place. It is not enough just to be “out there,” or take those hikes which have become part and parcel of the Jewish summer camp experience: for true interaction and integration to take place, the learning that goes on must relate to the apple trees and not just take place under them. And rabbis, who are accustomed to trying to elicit religious experiences among their congregants in the synagogue sanctuary, and via the *siddur*, the text of the prayer book (clearly often with only limited success), need to be trained to foster spiritual sensitivity out-of-doors as well, in response to Creation—in the forests, deserts, oceans, and even just the front and back yards of the World. There may be some surprises in store.

Three Zionist approaches were announced above, but only two were presented. The third is a *torah she-be'al pe'*, an oral teaching that has defied all efforts to trace it to a written source.⁵⁴ This interpretation zeroes in on two words: מפסיק ממשנו, *ceases, breaks off from his study*. The force of our mishna hinges on there being a dichotomizing, the breaking off of the Torah study in order to experience Nature. All the commentaries cited above assume this dichotomous reading, whether anti-Nature, like the Meiri or Schwartzschild, or moderately or radically affirming of the value of Nature, like Caro or Berdichevski. This assumption results in an either-or, black-and-white world view; it allows only for a pat acceptance of the *peshat* (in this case, the surface, literal meaning) of the mishna, or a Berdichevskian rejection, leading to the establishment of an opposite, but equally alienating hierarchy of values. As Jews, whether in the Diaspora or in the Land of Israel, we cannot מפסיק ממשנו, turn our backs on the texts, or cease to define ourselves in terms of them: an *exclusively* nature-based identity is not a Jewish identity. But neither can we afford any longer to accept the dichotomizing of the world and of our own souls. This third interpretation consciously negates that assumption, and proposes a competing version of the *peshat* based on synthesis.

Yes, if in order to relate to the natural environment you have to cease your learning, then your soul is in grave danger. This, then, is the sin that is castigated here: the radical rupture between Torah and Nature, the traditional, Diaspora-Jewish incommensurability of Creation and Revelation. What is called for today is *synthesis*, a supreme effort to mend that gap, to forge a common language for our disparate forms of religious experience. One who perpetuates this dichotomy, this spiritual feud, is in truth risking great spiritual, and physical harm. But one who walks by the way, engaged in Torah thoughts, and who ממשיך במשנו — *continues* that study, seeing the beautiful tree, and the field, and our relationship to them, as an extension, as an expansion, of that study, that person will have performed a great act of *tikkun* (repair): *tikkun ha-'olam*, a mending of the World, and *tikkun hanefesh*, of our (previously endangered) souls.

NOTES

1. *The Melton Journal*, no. 24, Spring 1991, p. 7.

I would like to thank Noah Efron and Noam Zion for their helpful critiques of the form and content of this essay; and the participants of the Beit Midrash Elul workshop on "Nature and the Human Spirit: Jewish Perspectives on the Environment" co-led by myself and Eilon Schwartz during 1993–94 in Jerusalem..

All translations of passages from the Babylonian Talmud are taken from the Soncino translation, Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein, editor, Soncino Press, London. The following abbreviations are used in the notes: M = Mishna; T. B. = Babylonian Talmud; T. Jer. = Jerusalem (Palestinian) Talmud.

2. It is important to emphasize "one of the roots." Much space in environmentalist scholarship is devoted to thrashing out various points of view on this issue. David Ehrenfeld, for instance, has argued that the rise of humanism and the Scientific Revolution plays a much more direct and central role. For a review of this debate, see Anna Bramwell, *Ecology in the 20th Century: A History* (Yale University Press, 1989), ch. 2.

3. *The Poem Itself: 45 Modern Poets in a New Presentation*, Stanley Burnshaw, Dudley Fitts, Henri Peyre, and John Frederick Nims, eds. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960) and *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself*, Stanley Burnshaw, T. Carmi, and Ezra Spicehandler, eds. (New York: Schocken Books, 1965). The pithiness of mishnaic texts, like *Avot*, lend them a poetic compactness that invites this sort of treatment.

4. There are even editions with the name of Rabbi Akiva, but this seems particularly implausible. The weight of scholarly opinion seems to support R. Ya'akov. See R. Travers Herford, *The Ethics of the Talmud: The Sayings of the Fathers* (Schocken, 1945/1962) and H. Albeck and H. Yalon, *Shishah Sidre Mishna* (Hebrew), 6 vols. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute/Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1952–56), in notes at end of tractate, who has R. Shim'on in the body of the text, but writes: "נִסְחָה אֲחֵר, וְנִכְּנָן דְּרַי יַעֲקֹב." – "a different version, which is correct has: Rabbi Ya'akov."

5. See T. Jer. Shab 10:5, 12c,d; Pes 10:1, 37b.

6. Recounted in T. B. Kiddushin 39b, and again at the conclusion of Hullin (p. 142a). The mishna (M. Kid. 1:10) which that particular gemara is relating to seems to be claiming that there is direct and immediate reward, in this world for the performance of mitzvot. Rabbi Ya'akov disagrees, saying: "There is no reward for precepts in this world . . . there is not a single precept in the Torah whose reward is [stated] at its side which is not dependent on the resurrection of the dead." (i.e., the next world). A Rabbi Joseph is quoted as saying there, that if Acher had interpreted as did his daughter's son, Rabbi Ya'akov, he would not have come to sin.

7. *Ethics of the Fathers*, p. 17.

8. It is interesting to note that the conclusion of this tale is that Rabbi Shim'on bar Yochai (or RaShBi, as he is known) is eventually reconciled with the Jewish people, and the world, when, as Shabbat eve is approaching, he sees an old man running with two myrtle branches in his hand. He asks the old man what they are for, and he tells him that they are in honor of the Shabbat, one symbolizing *Zachor* ("remember"—the aspect of the Shabbat emphasized in the Ten Commandments in the book of Exodus) and the other representing *Shamor* ("observe"—the aspect of the Shabbat in the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy). In other words, the (apparently original, unprecedented) ritual use of the branches of a tree in the context of Shabbat helps put his mind at ease about the fate of the world.

9. T. B. Berachot 35b. Due in part to his mystical, fiery character, and also to the mysterious isolation in the cave, RaShBi is traditionally considered to be the author of the great mystical masterwork, the *Zohar*.

10. This last is Neusner's rendition, in his *Torah From Our Sages: Pirkei Avot* (Rossel Books, 1984), p. 679.

11. The Mishna (same root – מִשְׁנָה) was the first great codification of the Oral Law, and though we are familiar with it in book form, it was originally oral, meaning that people learned it by heart (hence the need for constant repetition) and taught it solely verbally. Those people were the *tannaim*, which is also from the same root, with an Aramaic transposition of ט–"t" for ש–"sh."

12. Rabbi J. Hertz, *Sayings of the Fathers* (New York: Behrman, 1945), p. 53.

13. But there are other uses of this interesting word נִאֻם. For instance, in a well-known passage from Midrash Tanhuma (Tazria, section 5, and Tanhuma, Buber ed., section 7) the Roman curate Turnusrufus asks Rabbi Akiva: “Whose works are more נִאֻם – those of God or those of human beings?” From the rest of the story, and the examples bandied back and forth between them, it seems unlikely that they are talking in purely aesthetic categories; specifically, Rabbi Akiva’s *coup de grace*—the superiority of cakes and cloth to raw wheat and flax—seems to imply functional value as well. In-depth study of this *aggada* can reveal a great deal about rabbinic attitudes towards Nature, culture, and the human role in Creation.

14. This is the Talmudic phrasing. As codified in the Shulchan Aruch (O.H. 225:10), the full standard blessing בָּרֵךְ אֱתָהּ אֱלֹהֵינוּ – “Blessed are You, Lord our God, Sovereign of the Universe. . .”) is required. It is explained there that the blessing is to be recited upon seeing beautiful creatures of all sorts: this includes people (non-Jews, even idolators, as well as Jews) and all sorts of beasts. In T. J. Berachot 13b,c, it is related of Rabban Gamliel that he recited this blessing upon seeing a beautiful Roman woman, no less one of God’s handiworks.

This is one of the בְּרִכּוֹת הַתֵּנוּן, the blessings of “enjoyment.” As opposed to other forms of benedictions, which are to be recited at prescribed times, either during a prayer service, or before the performance of a mitzva, these *berachot* are essentially a set form for spontaneous reactions of wonder and thanksgiving for experiences of various aspects of Nature. These blessings potentially have the power to cultivate a deeper appreciation of elements of the world around us, but sadly, they are rather underemphasized in contemporary Jewish spiritual education. This particular blessing, in fact, is apparently no longer said at all by Ashkenazim, according to the Mishna Berura, the authoritative Eastern European law code published less than a hundred years ago (though the blessing still appears in most prayer books that include a section on “blessings for various occasions”). In any event, if said at all, it is best recited in an abbreviated form, without mentioning the Name of God or God’s sovereignty (בְּלֹא שֵׁם וְיִמְלִכוֹת). See Mishna Berura, vol. 2, 225:10, note 32; and Chayei Adam (Avraham Danziger, 18th C. Lithuania) 63:1. The latter gives the astonishing reason that, since we are only required to make blessings of this sort upon the very first contact with the creature or object in question—“when the enjoyment is still intense, and the difference [from one’s usual routine] is great”—it is no longer appropriate to do so, since: אִם רָגִילִין חֲמִיד בּוֹה, וְאֵין לֵנוּ שֵׁנוּי מְדוּל – “we are always accustomed to this, and we don’t experience any striking contrast.” Even if Vilna of 1790 were exceptionally beautiful (all year round) it is hard to fathom this rationale. This sort of blessing is designed precisely to foster a sense of wonder at things we might otherwise take for granted. Danziger, his rabbinic erudition notwithstanding, seems to be precisely the focus of some of the barbs in Caro’s commentary (see below).

15. Neusner, p. 105, presents a particularly interesting *midrash* on the interaction of human and divine here:

This is a stern message. It emphasizes that the beauty of the tree, the beauty of a field one has worked to plow—the creation of God, the creation of humanity—must not take our minds away from the labor of Torah, which belongs both to God and humanity. God created the tree, humanity plowed the field, we as earnest students of Torah take God’s creation and make it humanity’s.

16. Charles Taylor, *Sayings of the Jewish Fathers . . .* (New York: KTAV, 1969, first published 1897), p. 48.

17. Herford, p. 73.

18. Hertz, op. cit., p. 53.

19. Used here is the New J. P. S. translation of this verse. This verse is considered particularly apt by many commentators, since it is explicitly quoted directly in the following mishna.

Rabbi Yosef Ya’avetz (or Jabez, Spain-Italy, 15–16th C.) presents a fascinating alternate understanding of what it might mean for “Scripture” to accuse. To the modern ear, however, it sounds slightly whimsical:

The Torah gets angry with him: for this reason it does not say simply “forfeits his life” as it does above (3:5), but rather *Scripture accounts it to him*—because it is the Torah itself that is angry at him [for abandoning it]. (p. 77).

20. Judah Goldin, ed., *The Living Talmud* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 127.
21. *Ibid.*, in translation of Aknin's commentary, p. 128. Also S. R. Hirsch, *Chapters of the Fathers* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1967, trans. Gertrude Hirschler), p. 47.
22. Rabbi Max J. Routtenberg, in his translation of Avot in *Siddur Sim Shalom* (Rabbi Jules Harlow, ed., Rabbinical Assembly, 1989), p. 623. He adds, in note 15 (p. 664): "Literally, 'guilty against his own soul.'" However, in a previous mishna (3:5), where the identical phrase occurs, he translates: "endangers his life."
23. Canon H. Danby, *The Mishna* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), p. 451. Also in *Mishnayoth* (Philip Blackman, ed. and trans., Gateshead: Judaica Press, 1977), vol. 4, p. 523. The latter however renders the other occurrence (according to his numbering, 3:4) "such a one is guilty against himself."
24. Herford, *op. cit.*, p. 73. Also Hertz, *op. cit.*, p. 53. He, too, renders this phrase otherwise in 3:5, "such a one sins against himself" (p. 51).
25. Neusner, *Mishna*, p. 679.
26. Taylor, p. 48 (inner quotation marks in the original).
27. *Soncino Talmud: Aboth* (translated and edited by J. Israelstam, London: Soncino, 1935), p. 31. An alternative is added there in a note: "or incurs guilty responsibility for his life."
28. Reuven Bulka, *As a Tree By the Waters: Pirkey Avoth: Psychological and Philosophical Insights* (Feldheim, 1980), p. 111. Cf. also Hirsch, *ad. loc.*, who adds in his comments (p. 47): "it is as if he had sinned against his own soul, or rather, as if he had forfeited his soul." See also Hertzberg's translation of Berdichevski included below.
29. This appears in Sir Leon Simon's translation of Bialik's essay "Halacha and Aggada," in the *Anthology of Hebrew Essays*, Israel Cohen, B. Y. Michali, eds. (Tel Aviv: Massada Publishers, 1966), p. 378.
30. From the epigraph to Cynthia Ozick's short story "The Pagan Rabbi" in *The Pagan Rabbi* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971). See below for a discussion of the views presented in her story.
31. Avraham Shtal, *Pirkei Avot* (Hebrew, Tel Aviv: HaKibbutz HaMe'uchad, 1988) claims that there is a crucial difference: "there he was engaged in acts that are completely unacceptable, whereas here, he praises God by glorifying the Creation. Even so, this too is forbidden, because Torah study is more important" (p. 148). See the following section which presents other commentaries on this issue.
32. M. Ketubot 3:2; M. Bava Kama 3:10; M. Hullin 1:1. In addition, the phrase occurs in B. T. approximately another dozen times, also with the same sense.
33. There are of course commentators who do read this in a physical sense. Rashi (*ad. loc.*) comments: מַחֲזִיק בְּנַפְשׁוֹ – risks his life, for Satan is not able to harm one who is occupied with Torah. Duran makes a similar comment (*Magen Avot*, quoted in Goldin, *op. cit.*, p. 128). And Rabbi Yitzchak Magriso, a compiler of the eighteenth-century Ladino *Yalkut Me'am Loez*, translated from the Ladino into Hebrew by Shemuel Yerushalmi (Jerusalem: Wagschel, 1972) says that the danger involved is that the traveler is liable to be hurt by wild animals, "for wild animals can have no power over a human being unless he becomes like an animal; and a person who does not engage in Torah study is likened unto an animal. . ." (Hebrew version, p. 125).
34. In the Encyclopedia Judaica entry on "Law and Morality" (vol. 10:1484), Saul Berman writes of the "didactic" use of the death penalty threat:
While the Bible lays down the penalty of death at the hands of the court for a variety of crimes, the *tannaim* had already begun using the ascription of the death penalty to crimes for which clearly no court would prescribe such punishment. This exaggerated penalty was an effective way of communicating rabbinic feelings about the enormity of misbehavior. The *amoraim* made extensive use of this device to indicate their indignation at immoral behavior. Thus, in a passage which makes manifestly clear that it is aimed at emphasis rather than true legal liability, the Talmud says, "A mourner who does not let his hair grow long and does not rend his clothes is liable to death" (T. B. Mo'ed Katan 24a). Similarly the rabbis asserted that "Any scholar upon whose garment a [grease] stain is found is liable to death." (T. B. Shabbat 114a)

35. Goldin, loc. cit., p. 128.

36. I am indebted to my friend and colleague Eilon Schwartz for the suggestion of this analysis of the commentaries, as well as many other insights that contributed to the development of the ideas in this essay.

37. Goldin, op. cit., p. 128.

38. Of course even this minimal acceptance of the value of the appreciation of Nature is on the condition that it is not for its own sake, but as a means to praising God, and acknowledging the greatness of the Creator. Two twentieth century Orthodox commentators address this point. Aharon Shelomo Katriel Maharil is particularly clear about this, in his *Avot Ha'olam Hakadmonim* (Jerusalem, 1929):

... since he said "how fine is this tree, how fine is this field" and did not include God's name (i.e., did not say an actual blessing), this then is idle talk, and constitutes a break from his studies, and he forfeits his life, as it says in the Zohar (Lech Lecha, 92): one who leaves the Torah, even for a single hour, is like one who leaves the life of the world. ...

Another aspect: there is actually no problem in saying "how fine is this tree," for one can claim that his intention was for the sake of the blessing. But as for "how fine is this field"—there is no blessing, and so that (illegitimately) diverted his mind from Torah, and for that he forfeits his life.

And Irving Bunim, in *Ethics from Sinai* (Feldheim, 1964), adds:

The exclamation of rapture, "How beautiful is this tree," etc., comes forth not as part of religious expression but as an interruption of Torah study, in contrast and opposition to it. Basically, Judaism wants us to enjoy life in this world and experience the pleasures which stem from a contemplation of the beauties of nature. But too many of us appreciate nature merely as nature, as something separate and apart, out of any larger context. We fail to see in nature's great beauty, in its wonder and mystery, the hand of a Creator, the Master of the universe (vol. 1, p. 267).

39. *Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez*, trans. David Barocas, ed. R. Aryeh Kaplan (New York: Moznaim Pub., 1990), pp. 142–143.

40. Bulka, op. cit., pp. 111–12; cf. Hirsch, ad loc.

41. Yosef Chayyim ben Yitzchak Caro, *Minchat Shabbat* (*Solet LeMincha*), Hebrew, commentary to Pirke Avot, Krotoshin, 1847, ad loc.

42. Steven S. Schwarzchild, "The Unnatural Jew," *Environmental Ethics*, 1984, 6:360.

43. Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), sect. 118, p. 141.

44. Ozick, op. cit., pp. 20–1, 35–36.

45. This characterization is from Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea* (Atheneium, 1972; JPS 1959), p. 291. He places his selections from Berdichevski in a section entitled "Rebels at their most defiant."

46. This translation is from Hertzberg, *ibid.*, pp. 296–297. The original essay, called "דו־פְּרָצוּפִים" ("Two-Faces," or "In Two Directions" according to Hertzberg), written c. 1900–1903, can be found in his collected works, *Essays*, volume, p. 45 (Tel Aviv: Dvir, Tel Aviv, 1960), *Essays* volume, p. 45.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 292.

48. Actually, neither did Berdichevski. He spent the last years of his life working on a massive collection of Jewish aggada and folklore, *Mimekor Yisrael*, not unlike Bialik's *Sefer Aggada*.

49. Translated by Sir Leon Simon, cf above, n. 29. This passage appears on p. 378. The Hebrew original, written in the early years of this century, can be found in the collected writings of Ch. N. Bialik (Tel Aviv: Dvir, original 1938, reprinted 1971), p. 219.

50. This need not sound too strange to the contemporary ear. One of the "hottest" topics in environmental thought today is bioregionalism and "a sense of place"—the importance of one's connection to one's immediate area and its environment. As Jews, can we seriously speak of establishing a deep sense of place, of totally integrating with our environment—making it a part of ourselves, and ourselves a part of it—in New England, or the American Southwest, or the pampas of South America—without always having in the backs

of our minds that something is not quite right? that we Jews once had a *monumental* “sense of place,” and it has been renewed, for some, with the reestablishment of the State of Israel in the Land of Israel? This is the (unabashedly Zionist) question for the reader to ponder: can we speak of “Jewish bioregionalism” anywhere else but there, in what is known in our tradition as *ha-aretz*, the Land?

51. Important pioneering work in this field is being done by the American group, Shomrei Adama. Clearly, Jews need to be approached educationally where they are (physically, and otherwise), and ethically speaking, a universal vision is essential—but see the reservations expressed in the previous note.

52. The literal translation of this epithet for God—*makom*—is “place.” A full exploration of the history and implications of this fascinating term are beyond the scope of this essay, but the potential for “green midrash” is clear. It might even be claimed that the best Hebrew translation for the ecological term discussed above in note 32, “a sense of place,” is precisely this: *אדם למקום*, בין אדם למקום, the relationship between humans and the(ir) Place—theological ramifications intended. It should be noted, though, that a classic midrash (Gen. Rabbah 68:9) explicates this phrase as a negation of pantheism: “God is the place of the World (העולם), but the World is not the Place of God,” i.e., all of creation, the entire universe, does not—cannot—contain Divinity.

53. Literally, “the commandments between people and ‘their’ world.” For some, this would constitute a fourth category of *mitzvot* after the two original types, and the third, Chassidic, addition of *מצוות לעצמי*, בין אדם לעצמו, *bein adam le'atzmo*, commandments, or duties of a human being to his or her self.

Of course, the possessive pronoun, expressed in the Hebrew suffix “-ו” (עולמו), should be interpreted as indicating *relationship*, not *possession*, as in the phrase *אדם לחברו*, בין אדם לחברו, between people and their fellows. For the midrashically minded, the theologically suggestive possibility exists of interpreting that little suffix as referring (possessively) to “‘His’ world” i.e., God’s world—*kemo she-katuv*, as it is written, *לְהו'הָ אֶרֶץ וּמְלוּכָה* - “the Earth is the Lord’s” (Ps. 24:1).

54. Many people attribute the following teaching to Rav Kook, the great thinker and spiritual teacher of the early part of this century, and first Chief Rabbi of Israel. Though this is very much in the spirit of his thought, in the only place he relates expressly to our mishna, he says something very similar to Reuven Bulka above. In his *Orot Ha'Torah* (9:7, p. 45) he writes:

מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו מחייב בנפשו: כי כוף כל כוף מכל העולם אור חיים זורח הוא, אבל מן התורה שיפע אור חיים דהיינו ואין עובדים קדושה חמורה מקורית וחופפים במקומה קדושה קלה משתקת

The Light of Life shines forth from all parts of the world, but the Torah’s effluence is the Light of the Life of Life. Torah is the forceful and original holiness, while Nature in comparison is only a “lighter” and secondary source of holiness.

Though I have found no written reference, the aforementioned interpretation may have been an oral teaching of his son, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook.

KAREN ALCALAY-GUT

six

wings – just like
he said
 there were
six
wings
but they did not
cover face
or feet – instead
they spread
out to my head
and my loins
and embraced them
come
in
to my blessing
make
it yours

Munich Paranoia

The English teacher in the hotel room TV
turns into a vampire and I suddenly fear
that the luxurious heated bath was created
to electrocute me even as now we soap
each other down to innocence.

In the streets it is worse.
Monuments dwarf us – little Jews
learning our wandering place
recognizing from where our destruction emerged.

It begins to seem inevitable, the forging
and erasing of history – in museums, books, films.
What happened to my parents:
transformed to fantasy.

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In the bier stube, the waitress
identifies my sad shtetl strains
and waits for my food to cool
before she serves it, daring me
– her heavy shoulders thrust forward
– to complain.

At last there is something I can sink
my teeth into – this
I will not swallow –

I rise, raise
my voice, shout out
for the whole room to hear:
Jews don't eat
cold food

Voyage Home

One afternoon in Zacobane, she took
the old diaries she had brought
from Israel, and gave them to her cousin
to read to her.
She understood the Polish,
grasped at each word, and followed
Mother's writhing story
of wandering
through Czechoslovakia, Rumania,
all the way to Italy
and the Altalena –
the voyage to the land
of the Jews, and how Mother saw
Father there, waiting for her and their son.
She was empty-handed.
Between the diaries
and the cousins' visit
in the sleepy town of Zacobane
there were fifty years.
The child who vanished on the way
waited for that quiet afternoon
to appear, real
as the forests of Poland.

Shmuel HaKatan and the Political Background to Avot 4:19

JEFFREY M. COHEN

THE TALMUDIC SAGES WERE ALL FOND OF QUOTING Scripture; but, quite apart from that predilection, the support of a biblical proof-text was clearly the strongest possible corroboration they could muster for any oral tradition they were transmitting, or indeed for any original personal viewpoint they were offering in the sphere of Halakhah or Aggadah. The corroborative biblical verse was always considered therefore as an essential component, not to be omitted in the transmission of their particular teachings. It was invariably subjected, therefore, by later scholars, to a close analysis in order to ascertain that it was truly “available” to underpin that particular teaching, or whether it had already been reserved as a source for a totally independent teaching.

The corroborative biblical verse was generally the very first piece of evidence to be analyzed in the discussion of any halakhic issue. Thus, on the very first mishna of the Oral Law (*Ber. 1:1*), which deals with the time from which the obligation of reciting the *Shema* every evening becomes operative, the Talmud immediately proceeds to ask on what biblical basis the Mishnah has made the assumption that there actually is such an obligation.¹ In other words, until that biblical support verse has been identified, any further discussion of the ritual or institution in question is premature.

We need not enter here the issue of the method by which the earliest halakhic traditions were framed and transmitted, whether as “attached” exegetically to their biblical matrix or as “detached” traditions which, though originally inspired by the spirit and possibly also the letter of the biblical text, yet were only later linked to an appropriate biblical “peg” either as an aide-mémoire or in order to boost their authority.² What is clear, however, is that while from either of the above perspectives it would have been valid Mishnaic and Talmudic editorial form to quote an halakhic opinion or an aggadic statement either accompanied or unaccompanied in the first instance by its biblical support-text, yet it would be singularly inappropriate and mystifying to do the reverse: simply to quote a verse from the Bible and leave it to subsequent generations of Mishnah and Talmud students to guess at the elucidatory teaching that the sage whose name

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accompanies that particular biblical quotation must originally have offered. And yet, in *Avot* 4:19 we have that precise, anomalous situation:

Shmuel HaKatan said: Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles; lest the Lord see it and be displeased, and divert His wrath from him to you (*Prov.* 24:17, 18).

This mishna, taken at face value, cannot justify its place in the Oral Law, since Shmuel has done nothing more than quote Scripture. Indeed, none of the attempts of the classical commentaries to justify its place in *Pirkei Avot* and to explain its wider import appear convincing. Maimonides states that, “Although this warning was actually issued by Solomon in his wisdom, yet this sage (Shmuel) would reprove people in that spirit and warn them from falling prey to that sin (of gloating over the downfall of their enemies).”³ But surely, there must have been many sages who paid extra attention to certain specific biblical laws and moral exhortations, internalizing them and preaching about them regularly, but who were, nevertheless, not quoted in the Mishnaic context as if they had been the actual authors of the particular biblical concepts they were emphasizing.

In this context, R. Travers Herford appositely observes, “There are many quotations from Scripture in *Aboth*, but only in this one instance is a Scripture text adopted by a teacher as his own.” Herford then proceeds to offer an explanation of why Shmuel HaKatan’s name is appended to that quotation: “Presumably, he was in the habit of quoting it frequently.”⁴ We may still object that no matter how many times one repeats a quotation, it still gives the quoter no entitlement to be credited with authorship of the quotation.

Herford draws our attention to *Avot* 4:4 for “a somewhat similar case” of another statement in the name of a Mishnaic sage, Rabbi Levitas of Yavneh, whereas, in reality his is also a quotation, this time from the Wisdom book of Ben Sira (7:17). Herford finds it “certainly remarkable that Rabbi (author of the Mishnah) should have included in his list a teacher whose one maxim was a quotation from Ben Sira.”⁵

The two examples are not really analogous since, in the first case, Shmuel HaKatan’s quotation would have been immediately recognized as a well-known biblical verse. The quotation attributed to Rabbi Levitas, however, did not come from anything like so well known a source. Although Ben Sira is quoted in the Talmud, we have no reason to believe that its pearls of wisdom were common currency among the ordinary folk to whom *Avot* was clearly directed. By the time *Avot* came to be edited, several centuries after Ben Sira was composed, a vast Rabbinic literature had arisen to compete with the latter, by which time the popularity it may have originally enjoyed had long since waned. There was consequently a valid reason for the Mishnah to preserve a worthy Hebrew quotation from that “old manual.” It could well be that Rabbi Levitas was the only authority of his day who could boast a

verbatim familiarity with that work, and who actually quoted it in his addresses. This should not surprise us, as there were many of his colleagues who expressly prohibited the work to be read.⁶ It may well have been the case that, although Judah Ha-Nasi, editor of the Mishnah, did not share their antipathy towards Ben Sira, and may have been quite prepared to include even a specific quotation from that work, yet he may well have been totally unaware of the origin of that quotation by Rabbi Levitas, and may consequently have assumed it to have been an original statement by the latter.

How then do we explain the unprecedented attribution of a biblical verse to the Talmudic sage, Shmuel HaKatan? The explanation for this anomaly results from viewing it in relation to what we know of the character of Shmuel, though it is in fact very little, as well as of his part in one particular episode, the reconstruction of which may provide an immediate solution to our problem.

Shmuel was one of the second generation of Tannaim, who served under the Patriarch, Gamaliel II of Yavneh, during the last two decades of the first century C.E. Surprisingly, there is not a single halakhic statement recorded in his name, and even his aggadic expositions are few. His fame resided primarily in the fact that he was regarded universally by his colleagues as an exemplar of piety and humility. The Talmud describes the extraordinary lengths to which he would go, sacrificing his own honor and putting himself into the wrong, rather than that a colleague should be publicly embarrassed. A heavenly voice is reported to have descended, and proclaimed, "There is one here who is worthy for the divine presence to rest upon him, but for the fact that his generation is unworthy." Thereupon everyone turned and looked towards Shmuel HaKatan. He died without issue, and at his eulogy the chant was taken up: "Alas O pious one; alas O humble one; alas O disciple of Hillel!"⁷ The appellation, *HaKatan*, "the small one," is explained as reflective of his unique self-effacement. In similar vein, the Palestinian Talmud explains it as indicative that his piety was only fractionally less than his namesake, the great prophet Samuel himself, who also had no children.⁸

From one particular Talmudic report we may infer that Shmuel HaKatan was particularly preoccupied with the devastation wreaked by the Romans, and especially by their treatment of the religious leaders of Judaea. The extent to which this affected his emotional state may be gauged from the fact that on his deathbed, in the final hour of his life, when a man of such piety might have been expected to have spoken to his colleagues of matters spiritual, or to have begged their forgiveness for any inadvertent hurt he may have caused them, Shmuel prefers to talk about the political situation and the future fate of his colleagues at the hands of the Romans:

At the hour of his death he said, Simeon (ben Gamaliel, the Patriarch) and Ishmael (ben Elisha) are destined for the sword, and their colleagues for other methods of execution. The rest of the nation will be taken as spoil, and great turmoil will descend upon the earth.⁹

I link this preoccupation with the effects of Roman aggression to another famous passage which has a demonstrably similar focus and which not only sheds light on the background to Shmuel HaKatan's statement in *Avot*, but also provides a solution to our problem of how that sage's name came to be recorded as the author of a simple biblical verse.

By way of introduction to the passage in question we should emphasize the Patriarch Gamaliel II's strenuous efforts, around the year 90 C.E., to establish a fixed formula for all the blessings of an *'Amidah* which he was hoping would become universally accepted, and whose daily recitation would be made mandatory. Until Gamaliel's day the structure of the *'Amidah*, and the precise phraseology of the individual blessings recited each day in the prayer-houses was rather loose, allowing much scope for extemporization. Hence the many variant formulae of the *'Amidah* blessings which have been preserved in the Cairo Genizah and in the early Geonic liturgical compilations.

The scope of this article does not allow for treatment of the evolution of the *'Amidah*. Suffice to say that during the last few centuries before the Common Era certain blessings (or themes, before the structure or formulae of *berakhot* became standardized) became popularized and accepted as worthy of public recitation. Since regular attendance at prayer-houses was not yet the norm among the masses at that early period, those proto-*'Amidah* blessings were unlikely to have been recited in full, if at all, at the private level, even by those who did offer daily prayers in their homes.

It was this situation that Gamaliel was anxious to change, and to that end he placed it on the agenda of two successive annual synods that he convened at his academy in Yavneh:

Shimon Ha-pakuli arranged eighteen blessings according to an appropriate order in the presence of Rabban Gamaliel at Yavneh. Rabban Gamaliel said to the sages: "Is there anyone competent enough to frame the blessing against the *Tzedukim*?" Shmuel HaKatan stood up, and created one. The following year (at a subsequent synod), though he tried for two or three hours to reflect upon it, he still could not recall it.¹⁰

This *Birkat Ha-Tzedukim* ("Blessing against the Sadducees") was clearly a controversial issue among the Sages. From the *Tosefta*¹¹ we learn that one of the accepted blessings of that proto-*'Amidah* had long been a *Birkat Ha-Perushim* ("Blessing against Schismatics"), which afforded the praying community an opportunity of condemning those who threatened their national survival or religious and communal interests. Clearly this latter ancient "blessing" predated the Roman invasion of Palestine, as well as the rise of early Christian sects, but it was the natural context into which any specific modern-day reference could be inserted. The *Birkat Ha-Perushim* and *Birkat Ha-Tzedukim* are one and the same blessing, which, as a result of subsequent revisions, appears as *Velamalshinim* ("And for the slanderers"), the twelfth

blessing of our *'Amidah*. Contrary to popular misconception, that the original Palestinian *'Amidah* comprised eighteen blessings, to which the *Birkat Ha-Tzedukim* (or *Ha-Minim*—yet another title!) was added as a nineteenth blessing, we see quite clearly that the latter blessing was always an essential part of that proto-*'Amidah* unit. The total of eighteen blessings, recited in Palestine, was arrived at because in its original form the blessings *Velirushalayim* and *'Et tzemach* were combined as one blessing. It was only at a later period, in the context of a Babylonian revision of the *'Amidah*, that it was subdivided into two separate blessings, thereby expanding the *'Amidah* to nineteen.

Now although Gamaliel, at his first synod, was clearly requesting therefore an updated version of that preexistent blessing, the Talmud nevertheless reports him as calling for a “Blessing against Sadducees.” It has to be noted that for several decades before that Yavneh synod, and particularly since the destruction of the Temple (70 C.E.) had swept away those landed upper classes, the Sadducees had ceased to be a problem to the Pharisaic Rabbis. The “Blessing against Sadducees” was clearly no more than a euphemism, therefore, for the far more immediate threat to the survival of the nation, namely, the iron grip of Rome. And it was Gamaliel’s purpose at that synod to push through an official “revision” of that blessing within the new statutory *'Amidah*, a revision which would express clearly those Jewish hopes for the speedy downfall of that “kingdom of arrogance,” and, inter alia, the other enemies of Israel, namely the Nazarinnes and other Judeo-Christian sectarians.

It is important to stress that while this blessing is generally thought to be aimed exclusively at sectarians—and indeed, the later generations of Babylonian Amoraim when discussing that blessing do so in that exclusive context,¹² as they would, since Rome did not impinge in any way upon Babylonian Jewry—yet an examination of the text of the blessing indicates that Rome was in fact the author’s primary concern. This is evident because in several of the extant original Palestinian (Genizah) versions of *Birkat Ha-Tzedukim*, Rome is alluded to almost at the outset, before any reference to the specific Judeo-Christian groups:

Let there be no hope for apostates, and may *the kingdom of arrogance* be speedily uprooted in our days; and may the Nazarinnes and (other) heretics perish in an instant.

Significantly, the *chatimah* (conclusion) of the blessing—*Barukh . . . makhni'a zeidim* (“Blessed be He that humbles the arrogant”)—refers back exclusively to Rome (*zeidim* = *zadon*), and not to the religious sectarians. This does not really surprise us since, by comparison with Rome, the early Christian schismatics were, at that time, no more than a gross inconvenience.

To return to Gamaliel’s synod and Shmuel HaKatan’s blessing: We see from the Talmudic source-passage that Shmuel was able to frame a suitable imprecation against Rome and the other thorns in Jewish sides yet,

for all that, it did not win popular acceptance, to the extent that none of his colleagues committed it to memory or asked him subsequently, during the course of that year, to repeat it for them to introduce into their Synagogues and academies. That had surely been the Patriarch Gamaliel's clear intention and unequivocal instruction. The result was that by the following year even Shmuel himself had forgotten his own blessing, notwithstanding a valiant attempt to recall it lasting for "two or three hours."¹³

Several problems call for a solution: First, why, almost by consensus, had not a single one of Shmuel's colleagues committed his blessing to memory or bothered to introduce it, notwithstanding the fact that the authoritarian Patriarch, Gamaliel, was not a man whose word generally brooked any opposition. Second, why does the Talmud stress the fact that Shmuel "stood up" to formulate the blessing at that first synod. Third, Shmuel's "inability" to recall his own composition; and, finally, how was it that such a meek and compliant man was able to summon the courage and determination, at the second synod, to refuse "for two or three hours" to oblige Gamaliel, either by recalling his previous year's composition or at least by attempting to offer a substitute.

There can be only one answer to all these questions: Fear of Roman recriminations against anyone publicly uttering seditious sentiments or any statement critical of the Roman administration. Judaea was littered with the corpses of those who threatened the occupying power politically or even merely theologically.

There is the famous story in the Talmud of three leading sages and an associate, Judah ben Gerim, who was a secret informer to the Romans.¹⁴ They were discussing the situation under Rome. One sage praised the roads, marketplaces, bridges and bathhouses which Rome had introduced, whereupon Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai observed that everything they did was for their own advantage: roads and marketplaces to put harlots therein, bridges to levy tolls and bathhouses to glorify and delight their bodies. Judah ben Gerim reported Shimon's criticism widely, with the result that the governor issued a proclamation that he be apprehended and executed. Shmuel HaKatan and his colleagues, fellow members of Gamaliel's synod, were thus well aware of the dangers involved in following that Patriarch's instruction to introduce such a condemnatory blessing (or even a modified version of any such preexistent blessing).

It seems obvious therefore that Shmuel HaKatan, famous in his generation for his humility and Hillelite pacifistic nature,¹⁵ would have been the least likely person to have volunteered to compose such a denunciation, unless forced to do so by his lord and master, Gamaliel, whose authoritarianism is referred to critically in so many Talmudic passages.¹⁶ Bearing in mind the presence, even in the academies of learning, of rabbinic spies for Rome, of the ilk of Judah ben Gerim, we can have some inkling of the personal danger

in which anyone composing a prayer against Rome would be placing himself, since the identity of their traducer would assuredly be disclosed to the Roman authorities.

It is more than likely, therefore, that Gamaliel—who was not a person to show much concern for the feelings or anxieties of his colleagues—gave Shmuel no choice when no one responded voluntarily to his request for someone to frame that blessing. The statement that “Shmuel HaKatan stood up and framed it” probably reflects the instruction given to him by the Nasi—to “stand up” and obey. Indeed, it was Gamaliel’s wont to insist that any colleague whom he wished to bend to his will on any issue had to stand up before the entire academy, clearly to heighten that unfortunate person’s sense of isolation and vulnerability. He did it to the aged Rabbi Joshua when it was reported to him that the latter had contradicted his opinion that the evening service was obligatory.

“Joshua, stand on your feet,” he commanded him, “and let witnesses testify (that you contradicted me)!”¹⁷

He did it again to Rabbi Joshua on the issue of whether or not a distinction is made between the learned classes (*chaverim*) and the ignorant masses (*‘ammei ha-‘aretz*) when there is suspicion that a blemish might have been intentionally made in a firstborn animal in order to be able to redeem its sacred status and avail oneself of its benefit. Gamaliel believed that no such distinction is valid on this issue, and he was incensed when it was reported to him that Joshua had publicly contradicted his opinion:

“Joshua, stand on your feet,” he commanded him, “and let witnesses testify (that you contradicted me)!” Joshua thereupon stood up on his feet. . . .¹⁸

Rav Nisim Gaon, referring to these episodes, stresses that the worst part of Joshua’s ordeal was that Gamaliel insulted him by forcing him to stand up in public.¹⁹

Clearly, at that first synod we have a repetition of that scenario, and when it states that “Shmuel HaKatan stood up and framed the blessing” we may be sure that that self-effacing man would not have adopted that unenviable pose unless he had been so commanded by Gamaliel. So the picture that emerges is of a most reticent Shmuel being commanded to endanger himself by uttering a condemnatory blessing for the downfall of Rome. It is now hardly surprising that neither he nor any of his colleagues showed any interest in that blessing at any time during the course of that subsequent year. The dangers of introducing it into their academies were obvious. Hence even Shmuel forgot it himself—or at least so he would have Gamaliel believe by his persistent silence at the second synod.

Assuming our contention that Gamaliel made Shmuel stand at the first synod, the events of the following year’s synod now become much clearer.

Gamaliel is so irate that no one obeyed his command to learn and disseminate Shmuel's blessing that he decides to vent his spleen on Shmuel, clearly blaming him for not popularizing it effectively. He makes Shmuel "reflect upon it for two or three hours." This is quite preposterous; for anyone who cannot recall something (especially a brief, extempore blessing) after ten minutes is unlikely to be able to do so after a half hour or even an hour. And if the mind is so patently blank, not only will it not avail, but, quite the opposite, it will only aggravate the tenseness of that mind to subject the person to public spotlight, standing in one place, with nothing to say, for "two or three hours." What took place was in fact a veritable terrorization by Gamaliel of the hapless Shmuel.

But why did Shmuel allow himself to be subjected to all that when he could have extricated himself by paraphrasing what he had said the previous year, or by composing a new blessing which would assuredly have satisfied Gamaliel? Why in fact did Shmuel display such uncharacteristic stubbornness and self-torture? What gave that meek man the courage and strength of will to resist that protracted psychological onslaught and public humiliation at the hands of Gamaliel?

Again there can be only one answer. Shmuel must indeed have been reported to the Romans after the first synod, as was inevitable. He must have received a clear and final warning of the consequences of his actions if he proceeded to repeat, let alone disseminate, his composition or to so much as breathe any future criticism of Rome. Hence Shmuel's determination to resist, with every fiber of his body, the attempt of anyone—even the authoritarian Gamaliel—to compromise him once again, and to force his head into the noose.

We are now in a position to return to the passage in *Avot* 4:19, and to explain why Shmuel HaKatan would go around the communities, perhaps especially to the impetuous youngsters being wooed by the Zealot parties to join them in another round of rebellion, in order to warn them against making any response at all to Roman fortunes or misfortunes both in and outside of Palestine. (The next major revolt did take place some 25 years later, 115–117 C.E., against the emperor Trajan.) Shmuel had received a personal shock to his system, and he knew that Roman intelligence was thorough and its recriminations swift and merciless. He thenceforth made it his personal mission to preach pacifism. But as any public figure knows, there is no guarantee that however carefully and clearly one spells out one's position and message, it will not be misquoted, whether inadvertently or maliciously. Hence Shmuel resorted to the allusive approach, quoting to all and sundry the verse from Proverbs, "When your enemy falls, do not rejoice. . . ." Everyone knew precisely the enemy to which he referred. They undoubtedly would have heard about the dangerous position into which Shmuel had been maneuvered at that first synod, and about the tense and

dramatic exchanges between him and the Patriarch at the second synod, as well as Shmuel's absolute resistance to the prolonged attempt of Gamaliel to coerce him into line.

Thus when Shmuel appeared in a public place, he needed to do no more than quote that biblical verse, with its tacit implication and cautionary message. Absolutely no commentary was required: its point was never lost.

In addition to his fear that any comment he might make publicly on such a sensitive issue (other than the mere quotation of a biblical verse) could be misrepresented and get him into trouble with Rome, Shmuel also may have been afraid of arousing the ire of Gamaliel, and of many of his own nonpacifistic Rabbinical colleagues, who would certainly construe his particular line of preaching on this matter as a treacherous exercise.

The shout of tribute taken up by the throng at Shmuel's funeral, "Alas, O disciple of Hillel!" now takes on a heightened significance. Hillel and his school were, of course, the pacifists. It was Hillel's disciple, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zaccai, who had himself carried out of Jerusalem in a coffin in order to conclude a peace treaty with Vespasian. The title "disciple of Hillel" was clearly intended to have a political overtone. (If it were merely to stress his peace-loving qualities, he should have been dubbed a "disciple of Aaron."²⁰)

That clarion-call to pacifism was certainly the mission of Shmuel in the final years of his life; it may well have become an obsession, as indicated by the fact that it preoccupied him even on his deathbed. His constant repetition of that verse from Proverbs is certainly to be understood as an essential part of that mission.

It is now clear also why Judah Ha-Nasi, editor of the Mishnah, in tribute to Shmuel, simply recorded the verse he used to quote, a verse whose context and application did not require elucidation to the Jews of that era, however mystifying it proved to those of subsequent ages, and to their commentators.

NOTES

1. In some editions this mishna appears as 4:24. See Tal. Ber. 2a: *Tanna' hekha qa'ei*.
2. On this subject see J. Z. Lauterbach, "Midrash and Mishnah: a study in the early history of the halakhah," *JQR* N.S. 5 (1914-15), 503-527; N.S. 6 (1915-16), 23-95, 303-323. Repr. in J. Z. Lauterbach, *Rabbinical Essays* (Ktav, NY: 1973), 163-256.
3. See Rambam, *Peirush Ha-Mishnayot*, ad loc.
4. R. Travers Herford, *Sayings of the Fathers* (Schocken, NY: 1962), 118-119.
5. Op. cit., p. 99 n.1
6. See Tal. *San.* 100b; Pal. Tal. *San.* 10:1 (Krot. 28a).
7. Tal. *San.* 11a
8. Pal. Tal. *Sota* 9:13
9. Tal. *San.* 11a
10. Tal. *Ber.* 28b-29a
11. *Tosefta' Ber.* 3:25 (Zukk. ed. p.8)

12. See the continuation of the Talmudic passage, quoted above, describing the two synods convened by Gamaliel (Ber. 29b) and Shmuel's inability to recall his Blessing against the Sadducees:

Why then did they not remove Shmuel (from his position as Reader)? Did not R. Judah say in the name of Rav: If one makes mistakes in all the blessings we do not remove him, but if in the *Birkat Hatzedukim* we do remove him, for fear that he may be a sectarian (and is trying to spoil its recitation)? But Shmuel HaKatan is different since he was the one who framed it (so he could not possibly be suspected of heresy).

After considering objections that there were, indeed, precedents for pious people who nevertheless subsequently turned to heresy, the Talmud offers a final reason why this possibility was discounted in the case of Shmuel, and hence he was allowed to remain at the Reader's desk, namely that he had clearly demonstrated his pure resolve to try and formulate such a blessing by actually commencing publicly to compose (recall?) it, but was unable to continue.

This entire Talmudic debate on the Shmuel HaKatan episode is to be understood as halakhic theorizing rather than a reflection of historical reality. It must first be appreciated, as regards the statement of R. Judah in the name of his teacher, Rav, that both sages lived over two centuries after the episode they were commenting upon. They (together with Abbaye and Rava, who also comment in the passage on the extent to which we must have regard to sectarian propensities) also lived in Babylon rather than in Palestine, and thus did not have a direct line to the tradition in question. Furthermore, it is clear that their understanding of the circumstances of the episode was that Shmuel HaKatan had been serving as a Synagogue Reader, and was in the midst of the *'Amidah* when he got into difficulty recalling that particular blessing. It need hardly be stated that there is no reference in the source passage to any Synagogue situation. Moreover, it is inconceivable that a congregation, however well disposed even to a sage of Shmuel's repute, would have waited patiently "for two or three hours" while the Reader recollected a blessing.

Again, there is absolutely no hint in the source for the suggestion that Shmuel actually made a start on the recitation of that blessing. That could only be a later, Amoraic theory to account for the indulgence shown to Shmuel.

More serious is the anachronism of that later Amoraic discussion which attempted to superimpose a subsequent halakhic distinction (recorded by Judah in the name of Rav) upon the description of the circumstances attending the embryonic stage of its formulation, when its statutory status was still being haggled over.

Finally, the Amoraic debate completely misses the mark, as it is concerned with a Reader who "makes mistakes" in blessings, whereas Shmuel HaKatan's situation was that of total omission, or, more precisely, refusal to recite.

13. This reference to the nonrecitation of the Blessing Against the Sadducees (or *Minim*) during the early period of Gamaliel's patriarchate and throughout the period of the synods in question—with the clear implication that this situation had long since obtained since the end of the Pharisaic-Sadducean struggle (during which time this blessing acquired its name), and certainly since the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 C.E. (when the Sadducees lost their power base, their estates, and their popular support), sheds light on a Midrashic reference to an *'Amidah* of seventeen blessings:

Say unto Him: 'Forgive all iniquity, and accept that which is *TOV* (good) (Hos. 14:3)'—Israel says: Master of the World, when the Temple was standing we brought a sacrifice, and obtained forgiveness. Now all we have is prayer—*TOV*—whose numerical value is seventeen. . . . (Mid. *Tanh. parashat Korah*)

I suggest that this reference to an *'Amidah* of seventeen blessings reflects the circumstances of the pre-Gamaliel period, referred to above, when the recitation of the twelfth blessing, against the Sadducees and other *Minim*, temporarily fell into neglect.

14. Tal. *Shabb.* 33b

15. Tal. *San.* 11a.

16. See Tal. *B.M.* 59b; Mishnah *R.H.* 2:9; Tal. *Ber.* 27b–28a.

17. Tal. *Ber.* 27b.

18. Tal. *Bekhorot* 36a.

19. See Commentary of Rav Nisim Gaon on Tal. *Ber.* 27b.

20. Cf. *Pirkei 'Avot* 1:12.

“Which is the Merchant heere? and which the Jew?”: Keeping the Book and Keeping the Books in The Merchant of Venice

ROBERT ZASLAVSKY

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE IS A PUZZLE. THE WAYS IN which it has been discussed suggest that it is more problematic even than the so-called problem plays of Shakespeare.¹ Indeed, if the lovers Lorenzo and Jessica are the Troilus and Cressida of this play,² then as the action progresses, we see how the subversion of the principle of measure for measure³ leads to an apparently artificial display of the principle that all's well that end's well.⁴ But the fit of all of this together is uncomfortable,⁵ because we are left with too many questions which have been apparently too easily resolved: what is the relationship between love and authority? by what measure are just judgments made? whose wellness and how many's wellness constitute the wellness of all and the well-ending of something? do our measures drive us or do we drive our measures? In broad terms, these questions force us to think through painful issues of self-knowledge, of the individual good as opposed to the societal good, and of justice.

And the focal point or flash point, if you prefer, of the interactions which ignite these considerations is the friction between the wood of Christianity and the flint of Judaism.⁶ If Judaism is the parent religion and Christianity the child religion, then that friction between religions expresses itself as a clash between parent and child. If, on the other hand, Judaism is the religion of law⁷ and Christianity the religion of love, then that friction between religions also expresses itself as a clash between authority and inclination. If, finally, Judaism is the quintessential insular religion and Christianity the quintessential universal religion, then that friction also expresses itself as a clash between absolutely heterogeneous multiculturalism and absolutely homogeneous uniculturalism.

In the broadest possible terms, the issues raised here assimilate to the issue of the tension between our individual or subgroup identity and our common human identity. That money is the touchstone of the tension is appropriate because money is at one and the same time an instrument of

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private hoarding and a universal medium of exchange, the vehicle alike for the misanthropic miser's isolation and the philanthropic benefactor's communitarianism, equally the root of all evil and the thing that makes the world go 'round. Indeed, we are all greedy in one way or another, greedy for possessions or greedy for fame or greedy for knowledge. And how greedy we are and for what we are greedy characterizes us as what we are. The central question of the play, then, is "What are we?" And the play as a whole provides no easy answer for anyone, no comfortable panacea. What, then, does it provide? It provides a framework for reflection on the issues. And as such, the play itself, or the inner meaning of the play, is like the contents of one of Portia's caskets, and the text of the play is the inscription guiding us to a proper choice. Whether we will choose as Morocco or as Aragon or as Bassanio or as none of them is left to us.

The play, then, is a guide for the perplexed. But it is a guide for the perplexed that creates in us the very self-conscious perplexity with which it helps us to come to terms. Thus, by making us aware of difficulties of which we had been previously unaware, it forces us to look thoughtfully at what we do unthinkingly, all too unthinkingly. And what we do unthinkingly has its most powerful source in our ingrained notions about the important things. And our ingrained notions about the important things have their source in our religious beliefs. For if we are raised in a religious family, we are Jews or Christians *before* we are *anything* else. Yet the brilliance of *The Merchant of Venice* is that it examines that phenomenon from the other end, namely, it examines the way in which we can continue to be Jews or Christians *after* we are *everything* else.

The Merchant of Venice is a puzzle. From its very first performances, audiences have been perplexed by it. The first mention of the play, in the *Stationers' Registers* for 22 July 1598 states, "Entred . . . a booke of the *Marchaunt of Venyce* or otherwise called the *Iewe of Venyce*."⁸ Thus, from the very beginning, audiences have wondered whose play it is. Is it Antonio's? Or is it Shylock's? Still later, if one considers that the two most famous speeches in the play are Shylock's plea for the common humanity of the Jew⁹ and Portia's "quality of mercy" courtroom speech,¹⁰ then one must ask again, "Whose play is it?" Is it Shylock's? Or is it Portia's? If one quantitatively answers the question of whose play it is, the play would be most Portia's since she has the largest number of lines and appears in nine of the traditionally divided twenty scenes of the play, and it would be least Shylock's since he has just over 360 lines (about 7.5 percent) out of 2731 lines and appears in but five of the twenty scenes.¹¹ If one emotionally answers the question, the play would be most Shylock's and least Antonio's. Finally, if one pedantically answers the question, the play would be Antonio's since he is the presumed nominal title character. Which, then, is it? If we trust Shakespeare, we must use the signposts that he has given us as our guide.

For either Shakespeare knew what he was doing or he did not know what he was doing. If he did not know what he was doing, if—that is—he merely provided a kaleidoscopic patchwork prompt for our private fantasies, then it is hard to justify our continued reverence and admiration for his work and the perennially compelling character of the plays which he wrote. If, on the other hand, he knew what he was doing, then we must bend our minds and wills to the simple yet difficult task of finding out what he knew and what he did as closely as possible to the way in which he himself understood what he knew and what he did.

In accomplishing this task, we must begin with the title.

The title, *The Merchant of Venice*, is a puzzle. As a Shakespearean title, it is unique. It is the only Shakespearean play whose title is an occupation and a place. As such, the two plays whose titles most closely resemble its title are *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, both of which are titled with a group and a place. *Two Gentlemen* focuses on the appropriately named Valentine and Proteus, the latter of whom has a father named Antonio and a servant named Launce (who is in turn the master of an unmannerly dog named Crab). In the course of the play, the Romantic named Julia disguises herself as a man in order to effect a reconciliation involving a ring exchange between the two gentlemen whose homoerotic friendship has been sabotaged by Proteus' heteroerotic treacheries. *Merry Wives* focuses on the humiliation and degradation of the pariah-like Falstaff, who represents the dark and lawless, yet attractively vital, underbelly of society.

The Merchant of Venice too focuses on the homoerotic (clearly latently homosexual) Christian Antonio,¹² who coldly uses Shylock to defend his relationship with Bassanio against the intrusion of Portia, whose presence in Bassanio's life has plunged Antonio into a profound state of melancholic depression which spreads to the society as a whole—a society whose only redeemers are the crude yet incisive servant Launcelot Gobbo and the elegant yet manipulative aristocrat Portia. Furthermore, *The Merchant of Venice* too focuses on the humiliation and degradation of the societally necessary pariah Shylock, who represents the Mosaic origins which the Christian society tries either to hide but use, or to Christianize and absorb.

This much the title reveals at first glance.

What else does it reveal?

It reveals that mercantilism is central to an understanding of intercultural and intersocietal relationships. And although Antonio is the presumed merchant of the title, the title may suggest that merchanthood is paradigmatic for personhood, in which case everyone in the play is a merchant, and the absence of a name in the title points to all of us and not to any one in

particular. This suggestion is strengthened if one considers that etymologically the words “merchant” and “merchandise”¹³ belong to the same family of Latin words that “mercenary” and “mercy”¹⁴ do, the family of Latin words that cluster around the word *merces* (fee, wages, reward).¹⁵ Perhaps, then, the coin of the realm and the coin of the soul are more analogous than we like to think.

This the title reveals at second glance.

What else does it reveal?

It reveals that the play is set in Venice, the glittering and cosmopolitan port in which, if anywhere, disparate cultures should be able to meet and coexist peacefully and without contention. The only other Shakespearean play which is set in Venice is *Othello the Moor of Venice*, the only Shakespearean play whose title contains a racial designation. In that play, a culture clash takes place in which the love of an expatriate black infidel mercenary who has converted to Christianity for a white Christian aristocrat shakes the very foundations of society. In that play, to borrow terminology from Hannah Arendt,¹⁶ a pariah turned *parvenu* discovers to his doom that culture is more than skin deep. He makes manifest that to wear one’s heart, or culture, on one’s sleeve, or skin, is to invite destruction at the hands of those whose practical need for an alien person serves only to exacerbate their psychic need to scapegoat that person. They transform him into a demon on whose exorcism their mental and societal health comes to seem to depend. *The Merchant of Venice* too shows us a pariah, but this time a “conscious pariah,”¹⁷ one whose pariahhood is most clearly illustrated in his refusal to eat with his Christian co-citizens, a refusal which is the external sign of his inability to pray with them. As Shylock himself says, in what must be considered an aside, even if it is not so marked in modern editions, when he is invited to dine with Bassanio and Antonio:

Yes, to smell porke, to eate of the habitation which your Prophet the Nazarite conjured the divell into: I will buy with you, sell with you, talke with you, walke with you, and so following: but I will not eate with you, drinke with you, nor pray with you.¹⁸

Can one trust anyone with whom one cannot break bread? For premodern Christians, especially if one considers the iconographic significance of the Last Supper (even if they forget that it was a Passover dinner) and of the eating of the wafer at Mass, whoever would not eat with them could not be considered fully human. Shylock feels the pain of this dehumanization and the unrepentant attitude of the Christians who practice it.¹⁹ When that pain drives Shylock finally to agree to dine with Christians, the result is that his daughter and his fortune have eloped with a Christian.²⁰ Given the circumstances, if he did not feel conspired against and paranoid, we would be astonished. Shylock is no Tevye fiddling on the roof while his children

and goods are absorbed into the Christian and secular society which surrounds them.

This much the title reveals.

The tone of *The Merchant of Venice* is a puzzle. It is classified as a comedy. But "what kind of comedy is this, we might well inquire."²¹ This is a just question.

If Shylock were simply the protagonist, as Othello is in his play, then this would be a tragedy indeed. Of course, then, what is now designated as the fifth act of the play would be out of place, as it seems to be even to some now. The reunion of all but Shylock and the Duke at Portia's home at Belmont, the beautiful mountain, which—given the pervasive Biblical references in the play²²—could ironically allude to Ararat after the flood or Sinai or the Sermon's Mount or Calvary at the Crucifixion,²³ perhaps even a kind of cosmetized Dantean Mount Purgatorio,—such a reunion, which neither integrates the offending element²⁴ nor embodies the health of the secular authority in someone such as the Duke, cannot be regarded as the full reconciliation which comedy classically requires to achieve its closure.

The only other person than Shylock in Shakespeare's nontragedies to be broken and ground under in this way, without integration or redemption, is the Falstaff of the history plays and *Merry Wives*. Apparently, then, neither Falstaff nor Shylock can be integrated easily into Western Christendom. Both are outside society in some decisive sense. Aristotle suggests that the only beings which can live outside society are the beast and the god.²⁵ Falstaff is clearly the avatar of the beast, the natural animal vitality which Christian governance (incarnated in Prince Hal/Henry V, whose true staff or scepter of noble and borderline-divine kingship must be forged in the smithy of Sir John's false staff or scepter of base and borderline-bestial appetite) must constrain. Is Shylock, then, somehow the adumbration of a god? He is, and he is not, and this is part of the paradox of Judaism. Insofar as he is, he incarnates the invisible wrathful legalistic god of the Jewish Bible. But such a god without a cohesive people in a defined homeland is a fish out of water, because the fierce love of one's own by which such a god is activated and which such a god activates in its worshippers can become foundationless in an alien society. In other words, the problem which Diaspora Judaism makes manifest is the problem of whether an uprooted Jew must inevitably become a rootless Jew, a corrupted Jew. The only true incarnation, as it were, of the invisible god of the Jewish Bible is the people in its purity as a people and in the purity of its observances. Shakespeare seems to know this, to such an extent that the harshness of the sentence which Shylock receives in being driven to convert to Christianity is at least a triple-edged sword.²⁶

First, the treatment of Shylock is so far from the Christian Scriptural exhortation to love even one's enemies²⁷ that it constitutes an indictment of the hypocrisy of Christian society. The repeated puns throughout the play

on “gentle” and “gentile,” whose Elizabethan pronunciation would have been virtually identical and which are etymologically the same word, underscore how far these gentiles are from being gentle.²⁸ And if the beatitude is correct that the meek or gentle shall inherit the earth,²⁹ which means the true earth, then these gentiles shall inherit nothing more than a false earth. For if Bassanio has chosen the right casket, he has done so only with Portia’s help by means of the clues contained in her remarks to him and in the song which she has sung to him as he ponders his choice.³⁰ In actuality, these gentiles—and Portia is no exception—have chosen both the gold casket which contains nothing more than the death’s head that lurks beneath the surface of those who immerse themselves in the lifestyles of the rich and famous, and the silver casket, which contains the idiot’s head of merely secular justice.³¹ Instead of hearing the music of the spheres, all that they are hearing is the music of the dance band on the *Titanic*.³²

Second, the presentation of Shylock, from his initial attempt apparently to befriend the Christians, despite their bestial persecution of him, to his final apparently craven acquiescence in his conversion to Christianity, constitutes an indictment of Jews whose practice so belies their principles that conversion seems only right and proper. Indeed, Shakespeare seems to be saying of assimilationist Jews what Hannah Arendt says of the Jewish poet Heinrich Heine:

For Heine’s attitude, if only as a poet, was that by achieving emancipation, the Jewish people had achieved a genuine freedom. He simply ignored the condition which had characterized emancipation everywhere in Europe—namely, that the Jew might only become a [human being] when [the Jew] ceased to be a Jew.³³

And if Shylock is less to blame for his fall than are his Christian co-citizens, that does not mean that he is not to blame. And the intermarriage of Jessica to a Christian is, Shakespeare seems to say, the inevitable fate of the Diaspora Jew.

Third, our reaction to Shylock’s portrayal is a gauge of our understanding of the issues involved. If we consider his punishment deserved, we brand ourselves as anti-Semitic and xenophobic. If we consider it undeserved, we brand ourselves as socially, religiously, and politically naive. We seem, then, to be caught on the horns of a dilemma through which we cannot go. If our hearts do not go out to Shylock, we are damned as spiritually profligate and deformed, and if our hearts do go out to Shylock, we are damned as spiritually bankrupt and unformed.

Is there, then, no hope for us? Is intercultural and interreligious harmony neither possible nor desirable?

We humans are a puzzle. But what kind of puzzle are we? Are we a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces are miscut just imperceptibly enough to produce in us

an ineradicable desire to put the puzzle together, however impossible the task continually seems to us and however much the frustration which the attempt evokes merely causes us to abuse the apparently intractable pieces?

Perhaps not, even though when Portia as Balthasar cannot tell merchant from Jew, she suggests that it is. Perhaps the pieces are not miscut at all, but the picture is so complex that the fit eludes us. Are there any things in the play to suggest that this is the case? There are.

First, there is the implicit lesson suggested by those who are conspicuously absent from Belmont in the final scene. They are Old Gobbo (Launcelot's father), Shylock, and the Duke of Venice. In other words, the only persons in the play who are described as, or can be assumed to be, old are banished from Belmont. Left are the young sophisticates, Christian and Jewish. And their inability to hear the music of the spheres is rooted in their inability to cultivate the tradition that could make them better than they are. Christian and Jew alike have severed their ties with their Scriptural spiritual origins, and in doing so, they have lost their souls. From the Jewish point of view, if we are away from our spiritual roots, even if we are politically free, we may feel that "our soul is dried away" and that "there is nothing at all, besides . . . manna, before our eyes,"³⁴ and the bdellium-colored coriander seed will be hidden from us, unless each of us shares our spiritual responsibility with seventy others, and each of those with seventy more, and so forth.³⁵ From the Christian point of view, if we are away from our spiritual roots, if we have gained the whole world at the cost of our soul, what are we profited?³⁶ On this, then, both Christian and Jew spiritually agree, that if we lose our spiritual nourishment, we are blind and empty. Whether that spiritual agreement can ever be politically implemented remains, of course, an open question, as Shakespeare well knew.³⁷

Second, the Duke of Venice, by whose rule, after all, Jews are permitted to live in Venice, treats Shylock as evenhandedly as he can. He may not praise Shylock, but he does not condemn him either.

In order to form an opinion of the law-suit, it is important to emphasize the different social positions of the parties. A new citizen and half-citizen with restricted privileges faces a patrician and member of the ruling class. That is to say, a half-free subject files his suit against a gentleman whose liberty is boundless. In order to dispense justice in such a case, the court must be of unusual impartiality.³⁸

The Duke does the best that he can, and perhaps in more spiritually enlightened times, he could do even better. The world of the Duke, then, is what is best in the world of the ducat.

Third, as much as we may condemn Jessica for her abandonment of her father Shylock, we must not be insensitive to the role that Shylock has played in alienating his daughter from himself. Portia can sidestep her

father because he is dead, but Jessica cannot do the same. Jessica's name alone tells us that she is indeed Shylock's daughter. After all, Shylock compares himself to Jacob in his business practices, an apt comparison, and both Shylock and Jacob married women named Leah.³⁹ Jacob's wife Leah bore a son called Yissachar,⁴⁰ whose name is a form of the Hebrew verb which means "to pay wages." It is not too fanciful, then, to conclude that Shylock's wife Leah bore a daughter whose name Jessica is a pun on the name Yissachar, a pun designed to show what indeed are the wages of assimilation, wages which Shylock too, in his own way, has paid. Indeed Shylock, particularly since the death of his wife Leah, seems to have lacked warmth and compassion. And that he has not remarried shows him to be isolated even from his own community.

Perhaps if he had remarried and provided a proper home for her, Jessica would not have abandoned him and his tradition. Indeed, as a person, she is presented as at least potentially noble. She is the only person in the play who tips someone,⁴¹ and she tips well. And perhaps the only external invariable in Shakespeare's plays is that those who tip well are noble and generous in their character. In addition, when she says, "I am never merry when I heare sweet musique,"⁴² she shows that she is unmoved by the secular and pagan music which buoys up her companions. Her presence in this shallow Christian world, then, does not sit easily on her. And yet it is a world to which she is inexorably drawn, for although the "Jesse" which her name covertly contains points far back to Jesse's ancestor Jacob and near ahead to his son David, it also points (from a Christian point of view) to Jesus, the descendant of the line of Jesse (and hence ultimately of Jacob). Such tangled genealogical wordplay represents linguistic clowning of a very high order.

Finally, the clownish servant Launcelot Gobbo, the one whom Jessica tips, suggests in his own crude way that the worlds of Christian and Jew can meet.⁴³ Of course, some will say that his presence in the play is mere comic relief, but one Shakespearean rule of thumb that I have formulated and used fruitfully over the years is that when anything in a Shakespearean play is dismissed by others as comic relief,⁴⁴ it contains essential clues to the inner meaning of the play that contains it. This is no exception. The servant's name is the first indication that he caricaturishly represents a possible coexistence of the two traditions. His given name is the name of the preeminent Christian knight of the Round Table, and his family name is an Italianized version of the name "Job."⁴⁵ He moves from Jewish to Christian household with ease, he interacts with his blind father⁴⁶ in a way which is reminiscent of Jacob interacting with the blind Isaac, he is the only one to use the words "Pagan" and "Jew" and "Christian" in the same breath,⁴⁷ he acts as intermediary in Shylock's invitation to a Christian home,⁴⁸ he keeps Jessica's counsel,⁴⁹ he quotes Mosaic law,⁵⁰ and he bemoans the increase in the numbers of

Christians.⁵¹ In addition, he is the only one who is not present at Shylock's court case who could have been safely present, which suggests that he has no desire to see either party humiliated.

Therefore, Launcelot Gobbo represents the possibility of peaceful coexistence between Christian and Jew. But it is only a possibility, as the names of the Jews in the play indicate. The names are Shalach, Tubal, Chush, and Jessica,⁵² all taken from Genesis 10 and 11, in which the postdiluvian generations are enumerated and the Tower of Babel is discussed.

The Tower of Babel story suggests that a universal, unicultural, unilingual society is undesirable for humans. Whether a universal, multicultural, multilingual society is either desirable or possible for humans is left as an open question by the Bible, as it is also by Shakespeare. To be more precise, Shakespeare seems to assert its desirability but to doubt its feasibility. The test cases are *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello the Moor of Venice*, in both of which the attempt fails. To see Shakespeare's resolution of his doubts, we would have to look to *The Tempest*. To determine its feasibility for ourselves, we would have to look inside our own souls.

If we find that we have thematized Portia, whose name in Latin would mean something like gateness (i.e., instrumentality of access) and in English would jingle with both the Latin word for mouth (*os, oris*) and the rural ancient Latin and modern English pronunciation of the Latin word for gold (*aurum*)—and whose namesake⁵³ is the wife of Brutus (whose self-conscious republicanism was teased into self-loving narcissism)—then we have chosen the golden casket which on closer inspection proves to be a gilt, not to mention a guilt, casket. And if we find that we have thematized Shylock, whose name indicates that he has fallen even from his own orthodoxy and from his ability to preserve his own to the extent that he is “shy a lock” (i.e., wary of or lacking in the securing device which would have kept his daughter and goods at home, however much he possesses the superficial and easily picked locks on his treasure chests), then we have chosen the silver casket of a life guided by a narrow conception of quid pro quo in which one hand washes the other. But if we find that we have thematized Launcelot Gobbo, then we have chosen the lead casket—not the false lead casket which Bassanio chooses as a steppingstone to the golden casket of the world of Belmont, but the true lead casket of spiritual peace and enlightenment.

NOTES

1. An early version of this paper was read to the Temple Beth Hillel/Beth El (Wynnewood, PA) Seventh Annual Torathon, 9 January 1993, and a revised version to the Keshet Israel Congregation (West Chester, PA) on 5 June 1994. I thank both congregations for their enthusiasm and intelligence: their comments and questions helped me to formulate my views more precisely and more clearly.

The following critics—in order of their importance to me and my indebtedness to them—have wrestled impressively and seriously with the issues of the play as a whole: Allan Bloom, “On Christian and Jew: *The Merchant of Venice*,” in his *Shakespeare's Politics* (New York: Basic, 1964), 13–34; Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago: Phoenix, 1960), vol. I, ch. xii, 81–116; John Gross, *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy* (New York: Touchstone, 1992); Paul A. Cantor, “Religion and the Limits of Community in *The Merchant of Venice*,” *Soundings* 70 (1–2), Spring/Summer 1987, 239–258; Richard A. Posner, *Law and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 90–99; John Lyon, *The Merchant of Venice* (Boston: Twayne, 1988). In addition, those who wish to study Shylock's dramatic ancestry should read Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, and the discussions of the Pantaloon figure of the commedia dell'arte in Pierre Louis Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy*, tr. Randolph T. Weaver (New York: Dover, 1966, © 1929), 179–191 *et passim*.

2. Cf. V. i. 4–7/3–6. The primary text to which I have referred is *The Merchant of Venice*, a new variorum edition, ed. Horace Howard Furness (New York: Dover, 1964, © 1888), hereafter designated “Variorum.” But since there is no standardized lineation of Shakespeare's plays, I have given a second reference (to the right of a slash) to the Arden edition, ed. John Russell Brown (London: Methuen, 1964).

3. Consider Shylock's comparison of Portia-Balthasar to Daniel and his praise of such a judge (IV. i. 233–234/219–220, 236/222, 258/242, 262–263/246–247, 315/297, 318/300) to Gratiano's identical comparison and praise of the same judge (IV. i. 327–328/308–309, 333/313, 339/319, 349/329, 356/336).

4. Cf. V. i. 290 ff./266 ff.

5. Some critics try to remove the discomfort by mislabeling the play a “fairy tale.” Typical of such an approach is John Middleton Murry, “Shakespeare's Method: *The Merchant of Venice*,” in *Shakespeare, The Comedies: a collection of critical essays*, ed. Kenneth Muir (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 32–46.

6. Cf. IV. i. 35/31.

7. Cf. IV. i. 150/142, 216/202, 248–249/233–234, 329/310.

8. Cited in Variorum, “Appendix,” 271.

9. III. i. 53 ff./52 ff. This speech and Shylock's rating of Antonio's behavior at I. iii. 110–132/101–124 should be compared to Launce's diatribe about his dog at the beginning of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* II. iii.

10. IV. i. 194 ff./180 ff.

11. Cf. Norman Rabkin, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning* (Chicago: U. Press, 1981), 13.

12. Cf. John P. Sisk, “Bondage and Release in *The Merchant of Venice*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 20 (2), Spring 1969, 218; Lars Engle, “‘Thrift is Blessing’: exchange and explanation in *The Merchant of Venice*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37 (1), Spring 1986, 26 and context.

13. See I. i. 45/40, 50/45, iii. 49/44, III. i. 21/21, 121/118, ii. 252/238, 287/270, IV. i. 27/23, 33/29, 164/154–155, 181/170, 215/201, 244/229, 277/259, 313/295.

14. See III. iii. 3/1, IV. i. 8/6, 24/20, 93/88, 192/178, 194/180, 203/189, 207/193, 210/196, 212/198, 244/229, 380/359, 395/374, 438/414.

15. See A. D. Moody, “An Ironical Comedy,” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall/Spectrum, 1970), 103. [Hereafter this volume will be designated “TCI.”]

16. Hannah Arendt, “The Jew as Pariah: a hidden tradition,” in *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978), 67–90.

17. Arendt, 76–79. Cf. Arendt, “We Refugees,” *op. cit.*, 65–66.

18. I. iii. 33–37/29–33.

19. Cf. I. iii. 110–134/101–126.

20. II. v. and viii.

21. Morris Carnovsky, “On Playing the Role of Shylock,” in *The Merchant of Venice* (New York: Dell Laurel, 1958), 22.

22. See Barbara K. Lewalski, “Biblical Allusion and Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*,” in *TCI*, 33–54. Also see Sylvan Barnet, “Introduction,” in *TCI*, 5–6.

23. Cf. III. ii. 279–282/262–265.

24. Cf. C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (New York: Meridian, 1963); John Picker, “Shylock and the Struggle for Closure,” *Judaism* 43 (2), Spring 1994, 173–189.

25. Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, A. 2. 1253a27–29.

26. Cf. Larry S. Champion, *The Evolution of Shakespeare's Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U., 1970): "The insistence that Shylock become a Christian need not disturb us, because to most Elizabethans this would be an act of mercy." Such a view seems naive at best, morally obtuse at worst. Neither the sensibilities of the Elizabethans (or of ourselves) nor the dramatic context can make the conversion seem to be anything but cruel and unusual punishment (cf. Barnet, "Introduction," 7). The only question is how to gauge Shylock's attitude toward the punishment, whether his "I am content" (IV. i. 411/390) means "I am satisfied" or "Contentus sum" ("I have been contained").

27. See *Matthew* 5: 44 and *Luke* 6: 27, 35.

28. The defining occurrence is at II. vi. 58/51 (for which "gentle" and "gentile" are variant readings in the earliest printed texts). Cf. esp. IV. i. 38/34, but also II. iv. 21/19, 37/34, III. ii. 268/251, 271/254, IV. i. 195/181, and V. i. 284/260. See also Frank Kermode, "Some Themes in *The Merchant of Venice*," in *TCL*, 97.

29. See *Matthew* 5: 5. Cf. *Matthew* 11: 29 and 21: 5; 1 *Peter* 3: 4.

30. III. ii. Cf. Lynda E. Boose, "The Father and the Bride in Shakespeare," *PMLA* 97 (3), May 1982, 337; Bloom, 26–27.

31. On the choice of the caskets, see Sigmund Freud, "The Theme of the Three Caskets" (1913), tr. C. J. M. Hubback, in Sigmund Freud, *On Creativity and the Unconscious*, ed. Benjamin Nelson (New York: Harper TB, 1958), 63–69. Freud's analysis would lead one to infer that the three suitors are psychological aspects of one and the same man and that the three caskets are analogously psychological aspects of one and the same woman. This would suggest that to understand Bassanio, one must understand his hidden Morocco and Aragon characteristics, just as to understand Portia-lead, one must understand her hidden Portia-gold and Portia-silver characteristics. For an incisive nonpsychoanalytic reading of the caskets and the play through them, especially the relationship between Bassanio and Antonio, see Barbara Tovey, "The Golden Casket: an interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice*," in *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, eds. John Alvis and Thomas G. West (Durham: Carolina Academic, 1981), 215–237. In addition, for a subtle plumbing of the depths and intricacies of the psychological undertones of the conversation between Portia and Bassanio at the time of the choice, its analogical antecedent in the elopement conversation between Jessica and Lorenzo, and its implications for understanding the final judgment of Bassanio (and ultimately of Antonio), see Harry Berger, Jr., "Marriage and Mercifixion in *The Merchant of Venice*: The Casket Scene Revisited," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 32, 155–162. Although Tovey's and Berger's articles both appeared in the same year and independently of each other, it is as if Tovey has written a prologue which Berger deepens by seeing that what Tovey calls the "theme of appearance and reality" (215) is *au fond* an examination of issues of epistemology in interpersonal relationships and of power in gender politics. And Berger's notion that mercy can be a tool for economic and psychological crucifixion is a hermeneutically rich lever for prying open many of the play's subtexts.

32. For the importance of music imagery in the play, see Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery* (Cambridge, MA: U. Press, 1966) 269–271. Also cf. Francis Fergusson, *Shakespeare: the Pattern in his Carpet* (New York: Dell Delta, 1971), 118.

33. Arendt, "The Jew as Pariah," 75.

34. *Numbers* 11:6; cf. V. i. 320/294.

35. Cf. *Numbers* 11:16; *Exodus* 24:1.

36. Cf. *Matthew* 16:26; *Mark* 8:36.

37. See W. H. Auden, "Belmont and Venice," in *TCL*, 115.

38. Hermann Sinsheimer, *Shylock: the History of a Character* (New York: Citadel, 1964), 94.

39. Cf. III. i. 115/111.

40. *Genesis* 30:18.

41. II. iii. 5/4.

42. V. i. 78/69.

43. Cf. Bloom, 20, whose sense of the role of the clown is analogous to mine but whose interpretation of the significance of that role is opposed to mine.

44. Typical of such critics is Harley Granville-Barker, "*The Merchant of Venice*," in *TCL*, 55–80. Not only does Granville-Barker describe Launcelot's clowning as "incongruously superflu-

ous," but he also reduces the role of the "minor characters [e.g.,] the Duke, . . . Morocco, Aragon, Tubal, Lorenzo, Jessica, . . . the Gobbos, . . . Nerissa" (65) to that of minimally lively illustrations.

45. The variant readings for the name "Gobbo" in the earliest printed texts are "Iobbe" and "Iob." The "I" in the variants is equivalent to our "J," which tells us that the "G" in "Gobbo" should be pronounced like those in "ginger" and not like those in "gorgon."

46. II. ii. 31 ff./32 ff.

47. II. iii. 12/11.

48. II. iv.

49. II. v.

50. III. v. 2 ff./1 ff.; cf. *Exodus* 20:5.

51. III. v. 20 ff./19 ff.

52. Although I discussed above a punning use of the name "Jessica," the actual origin of the name *simpliciter* is "Iscah," the name of Milcah's sister (*Genesis* 11:29). See also Lewalski, 41, n. 17.

53. See I. i. 174–175/165–166.

International Conference: Jewries at the Frontier

The Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, will be hosting an international conference "JEWRIES AT THE FRONTIER" at the University of Cape Town from 11–13 August 1996. The conference coordinators, Milton Shain (University of Cape Town) and Sander L. Gilman (University of Chicago), are calling for papers that will explore the Jewish experience in frontier settings. The emphasis will be on Jews as a minority within a minority with hegemonic power in colonial and postcolonial settings.

Thus the conference will examine in an interdisciplinary manner South African Jewry; Anglophone Indian Jewry; Canadian Jewry with a focus on Quebec Jewry and Jewry in the Northern Territories; American Jewry of the colonial period and American Jewry with a focus on the South (French-speaking Louisiana) and the Spanish-speaking Southwest; early Australian and New Zealand Jewry; German Jewry (Haskalah and post-Haskalah) in the Baltic, Central, and Eastern European regions, including the non-German speaking areas of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; Jewry at the geographic margins in Latin and South America; Ukrainian Jewry in the 18th and 19th centuries; and any other communities that fit the parameters of the conference.

Abstracts of presentations are required before 31 January 1996. Presentations will be in English. There is a limited amount of subsidy for accommodations. For further information please contact either:

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RICHARD SHERWIN

Sabbath Queen

We sing you through the
field of sacred apples, through
the gate we opened
for the second soul you bring
us just in time, candle joy

What matter if we
flicker in the darkness wind
void all greeting songs
Our loves consume creation
weekly, so you return us

sabbath eves the soul
that heightens every sense and
doubling grace allows
our momentary lungs a
sacred apples breath again

Idols

Editors dont like
the stuff I write: modern Jews
dont talk to God who
if existing, doesnt answer
anyway, except to nuts

in fairy tales, or
Goyim too pious to know
theyre deluded. Jews
talk to Reason, Science, and
sometimes Goyim. And wonder

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why no one believes
a bloody word they say. And
look for the hook, horns
or tail, to catch them to hell
Modern Jews cant read my stuff

And Goyim are much
too busy working out their
own salvations to.
Oh well. I tell myself. Things
could be worse. How. Hell. Oh well

Grandfathering

Fiftys time enough
I thought to start the daily
bit, boxes and shawl
and prayers and all, just so
my grandkids have a grandpa

like I had so Im
not the last Jew in the line
whether or not God
exists like the Good Book says
ands in love with Israel

Prayings what Jews do
to keep making Jews in bed
and out, so I pray
Loves more than being in love
ands independent of all

perfections. Fifty four
now and just a little bit
later than I planned
on, I haul my ass out of
bed before the buzzer wakes

my wife, get dressed, and
grab my gear and stagger down
the stairs out the door
up the dunes and highstreet
to synagogue and all for love

Esther's King

After Marathon
the King of Kings returned to
Persian booze and broads
The closest he came to Greece
again was Esthers ouzo

but then a whipper
of waters is not so hot
on geography
as he is on drinking and
screwing virgins and hanging

high from the royal
rod whats fallen down on the
job like Haman pissed
on the royal couch for fear
his numbers up his lots cast

Born Again Jew

Mouth to mouth Lord you
revive my soul and thump my heart
into its sluggish
dance, staggering lungs like
bellows wheezing up my gorge

my morning prayers
muddled still with sleep until
my tongue and lips can
shape to perfect column notes
that brace this earth and heaven

firm together and
all the gleaming birdsong dewed
upon the grasses
tingle with the sun upon
this carcass you man again

Philo and Midrash

NAOMI G. COHEN

THAT MIDRASH IS THE LITERARY FORM THAT JEWISH thought and theology has most often adopted as the best medium for the exposition of ideas is an obvious but often forgotten fact. Although philosophical discourse and the midrashic style seem to be poles apart, midrash is often consciously chosen to express philosophical truths.

In the traditional Jewish world midrash is probably the genre most often used for theological dialogue. Although apologetics or an attempt to deal with anachronistic material may sometimes play a part in the creation of midrash, what inspires its use is primarily the positive emotional and ideational link to the sacred text felt by speaker, writer, and audience. Moreover, since Scripture was regularly read and publicly expounded, it was a natural and obvious means to transmit contemporary moral and social messages, and was ideal for conveying complex multivalenced messages that defy explication in simple logical discourse.

The thesis that Philo (c. 20 B.C.E. – 50 C.E.) was a writer of midrash and that his major works can be placed within the mainstream of Jewish midrashic tradition in no way compromises his stature as an original thinker. At the same time, no serious study of Philo can disregard the fact that his preferred medium was homiletic hermeneutics; the literary form of most of his writings was biblical exegesis, whether symbolic, allegorical, or literal, and he used this form to relay hortatory, expository, remonstrative, and didactic messages.

In Philo's day midrash was almost certainly the preferred form of public discourse in the Jewish world and a natural choice for anyone who wished to gain a hearing. The relative proportions of Jewish and Greek "patterns" and *topoi* was of course not the same in Palestine and the Diaspora, but the same *Zeitgeist*—spirit of the times—moved the Jewish preacher and the Jewish audience in the Diaspora cities of Alexandria and Antioch on the one hand, and in Caesarea, Tiberias, or even Jerusalem on the other. The sources give no evidence that visiting preachers from Judea to Diaspora communities were hampered by cultural or linguistic barriers.

The notion that the knowledge of Hebrew was necessary for the existence of a joint Palestinian-Diaspora midrashic tradition is mistaken.¹

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Not only was the Septuagint the property of Greek-speaking Jewry, but a broad spectrum of literature had been translated into Greek from Hebrew and Aramaic by Philo's time.

A well-known example of this is *The Proverbs of Ben-Sira*, which, as its translator informs us in his introduction, was translated in Alexandria for an already existing readership about a century before Philo was born. Much of what has survived to our day, has done so only due to its having been rendered into Greek.²

This weighs heavily against the argument that Philo could have had no significant contact with traditional midrashic lore because he knew no Hebrew, an assumption made because of his slavish dependence on the Septuagint—even using its text as the point of departure for his homiletic exegeses (*derashot*).

To argue like Samuel Belkin in his *Philo and the Oral Law*³ that even “if he [Philo] himself had no knowledge of Hebrew, he must have been informed of the Hebrew text by Alexandrian adepts of Hebrew Scripture” is not necessary. As George Foote Moore wrote in his classic survey of Judaism in ancient times, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*,⁴ Philo's knowledge of Hebrew is not crucial, since there is every reason to suppose that rabbinic tradition could and was conveyed in Greek—and indeed I have just pointed out that whether or not Alexandrian Jews knew Hebrew, they had at their disposal a veritable library of Jewish works in Greek translation.

Furthermore, the idea that Alexandrian Jewry in Philo's day was somewhat isolated from the contemporary social, cultural, and ideological ferment taking place in Judea can only be viewed as the product of narrow, specialized scholarship. On the contrary, the evidence shows that they were part of the same sociocultural world as their brethren in Judea, and it is reasonable to assume that such translation was an ongoing activity. Evidence for this in a slightly later period is the rapid “publication” of the Greek version of Josephus' *Wars* which had first appeared in a semitic vernacular—presumably Aramaic.⁵

This does not mean that all midrashists addressed themselves to the same type of audience. Such an assumption is patently absurd even within the same geographic and chronological setting; but then as now the sociocultural and political variables, rather than geography *per se*, were the most relevant factors.

Without wishing to minimize the significant differences between Philonic midrash and the rabbinic midrashic tradition in its present form,⁶ the two have more in common than appears at first glance, for the literary form of contemporary Palestinian midrash must have been much closer to Philo's works than would appear on the basis of the extant midrashic texts.⁷

These texts are mainly summary abstracts from several homilies. Only rarely do the rabbinic midrashic compendia, and even more rarely the

haggadic pericopes strewn throughout the Talmud, preserve their sources in a form remotely resembling what their style of delivery to live audiences of listeners or readers must have been.⁸

These very different literary compositions still contain many of the same Hellenistic commonplaces, and even more significantly, although their hermeneutic paths diverge, they frequently use similar biblical texts, key words of a verse, significant proper names, and so on, to arrive at a similar homiletic destination. These phenomena lead to the conclusion that indeed we are dealing with what was a common, living, midrashic tradition.⁹

Philo's Audience

Most of Philo's works would have been unintelligible to people unfamiliar with the Pentateuch and with the literary form of his writings. Philo's audience must have been not unlike Philo himself, with their Greek *paideia* (education)—including philosophic, theosophic, and general cultural allusions and frames of reference—and also with their command of at least the text of the Pentateuch, together with the midrashic method and the better-known midrashic *topoi*.

Even if we did not have fragments of Aristoboulus' work as proof of a long Hellenistic midrashic tradition preceding Philo,¹⁰ the highly developed form of Philonic exegesis requires us to posit the existence of such a tradition in order to explain how his readers could have understood his works. Without the interest the Church took in Philo's works, they would not have survived. But they would hardly have been worth quoting and preserving in Christian sources had they not been valued in contemporary Jewish circles. Indeed, Philo now and again expresses agreement or disagreement with the explanations of other exegetes: he was part of a flourishing genre.

In the light of these considerations, we must revise some generally accepted ideas concerning the extent of Jewish culture and knowledge among at least a part of Hellenized Jewry, for Philo's work is proof of the existence of a stratum of Alexandrian Jews who were familiar with both major Jewish and Greek classical literary texts.

One of the primary reasons why Philo's hermeneutics are often difficult for us to appreciate today, despite the popularity which his works enjoyed in ancient times, is that unlike his contemporary readers most of us lack a developed taste for the midrashic genre and, what is not less important, few of us know the Pentateuch virtually by heart.

For the most part we haven't the proficiency necessary to automatically make the midrashic and philosophical associations. These are essential to the connoisseur's appreciation of Philo's allegorical and symbolical exegesis of the biblical text from within the frame of reference of Hellenistic

thought. His contemporaries, less addicted to the written word, almost certainly committed more to memory than we do. And finally we can only surmise the contemporary problems being addressed by Philo.

Regarding Philo and *halakhah*: While the “oral traditions” were clearly very much part of the fabric of Jewish life in his day—and Philo states in no uncertain terms that he considers behavior according to these precepts to be incumbent upon committed Jews—the literature of the Oral Law was of course centuries away from redaction or codification. Philo could not therefore refer to this literature, nor could it have served as a subject for study in his day in the manner that it did in later times.

In the same way that a comparison of Philonic and rabbinic midrash refers to a common traditional midrashic pool but *not* to the rabbinic midrashic literature of later generations, so too Philo’s “unwritten laws,” “traditions of men of old,” and so on, although they overwhelmingly reflect either the *halakhah* as we know it or what in Talmudic scholarship are called “early *halakhot*,” they are not to be associated with the literature of the “oral law.” A pool of tradition in both the realms of *halakhah* and midrash, whose major outlines were familiar, is evidenced in his writings, yet this was not in the form of classic texts.

On the one hand an unbiased reading of the Philonic corpus shows Philo to have been a faithful and enthusiastic proponent of what he considered to be “normative Judaism”;¹¹ but on the other, this was not, and in the nature of things could not have been, synonymous with the *halakhah* as codified in the Mishnah, Tosefta, and later rabbinic codes, though they clearly had much in common.

As Josephus, writing about fifty years after Philo, has informed us, there was a commitment in the Jewish society of his day to “life according to Torah,” which was understood as encompassing the Pentateuch and other holy writings illuminated by the ancient traditions, together with the decisions of the contemporary religious authorities; and this was diligently transmitted from one generation to the next.¹² Yet to anyone familiar with rabbinic literature it is evident that these traditions were not monolithic. One need go no further than the differences of opinion between Hillel and Shammai, Philo’s near contemporaries, to realize how fluid the *pesika*—the actual *halakhic* fiat—still was in his day.

The Writings of the Sages as Historic Sources

Despite the existence of Josephus’ writings, the New Testament corpus, as well as the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and the ever-increasing information literally being unearthed in the Judean Desert, the rabbinic library remains the major repository of information concerning Judaism before, during, and after Philo; therefore, we cannot proceed without

discussing the methodological problem posed by these sources—that is, that virtually all the rabbinic literary material at our disposal postdates Philo by several centuries.

The problem of course is not new, and would not now have merited consideration had Judaic scholarship for the past generation not become enticed by the chimera of nineteenth century German Protestant biblical criticism (of both the “Old” and the “New” Testaments) of the Wellhausen school, which has been adapted to the study of rabbinic texts. At the very time that this methodology is being abandoned in Old Testament biblical studies, it reigns supreme in the scholarship of rabbinic texts.

The working hypothesis upon which this “revisionist” attitude to rabbinic sources proceeds is the presumption that the authors and/or redactors of the literature studied had little or no commitment either to truth or to the loyal transmission of traditional material—a thesis with which I disagree. To the contrary, I assume that unless there is reason to think otherwise, what is stated in the ancient text is to be considered the “truth” as it was perceived by those who wrote, and not, as is presumed by the followers of this variation of the Wellhausen “school”—conscious misrepresentation!

I am convinced that the assumption of conscious misrepresentation hardly reflects the normative attitude of rabbinic Judaism to its texts and traditions. Of course not everything found in these texts can or should be considered historically accurate; there are often valid reasons to question this. The necessity to read rabbinic texts critically and the ever-present problems of textual transmission and redaction are well known, but intellectual and moral integrity, as well as a commitment to the truth, are much better working hypotheses respecting the authors of our ancient sources (including Philo).¹³ With rabbinic authors there is the additional guarantee provided by the sanction of their colleagues of the *Beth Hamidrash*, who were scholars with a critical eye even for what appear to us to be minor details. Fabrications could hardly have been passed off as authentic tradition.¹⁴

This does not mean that one is justified in assuming that the ancient author achieved any significant degree of “objectivity.” It is a historiographical axiom that one cannot separate an author’s background, personal beliefs and commitments, and even the vagaries of personality, from his approach to the sources he considers. This is true equally for ancients as for moderns. But while the vision of the ancient authors must have been colored by their ideological spectacles and circumscribed by the blinkers that protect their wearers from painful and/or inconvenient facts, still, the radical distrust posited by the neo-Wellhausen school is certainly unscientific: its nihilistic approach flies in the face of accepted sociological reality, and makes any meaningful research virtually impossible.

Early Hellenistic Influences

Some remarks are also in order concerning cultural interaction, for this is a far more complex phenomenon than appears on the surface. If, as is becoming increasingly evident, the “Septuagint” translators were brought from Judea to Egypt to perform their task during the period of Ptolemaic hegemony over Judea,¹⁵ the Hellenization of Judea must have begun very early and not been a chronologically unidirectional affair.¹⁶ The sources do point to an early stage of Hellenization followed by a reaction, so that at least some of the Hellenistic *topoi* embedded in the midrashic literature must have become part of the cultural baggage of the educated Judean at a very early date.

Prevalent conceptions notwithstanding, I am convinced that the passing of Judea from Ptolemaic to Seleucid hegemony at the end of the third century B.C.E., less than forty years before the outbreak of the Maccabean revolt, did not exacerbate the Hellenization of Judea but, on the contrary, triggered a reaction against it. The eradication of the political border between Judea and the Babylonian Diaspora must have facilitated the interaction between the Jews in Judea and those in the East, whose cultural frame of reference included eastern mysticism and other components which served both as catalyst and fuel for the “religious ferment” against which Ben Sira polemicized. This, it is suggested, was one of the important factors which, within little more than a generation after the passing of Judea into Seleucid hands, sparked the Maccabean uprising.¹⁷

According to this hypothesis the pre-Seleucid wave of Hellenization left behind a cultural deposit that came to be considered part of “authentic” local Jewish tradition, and was no longer identified as a foreign element.¹⁸ The combination found in the ancient rabbinic texts of “bones of the body” + “days of the solar year” to explain the traditional number of “613 commandments”¹⁹ must, in my view, have stemmed from this early stage of Hellenization. The conjunction of these two images is a function of the philosophic conceptualization of the world of matter as being composed of “physical activity” in “time.”²⁰ Likewise, in my study of the names of the translators listed in the Letter of Aristeas, “at this early stage . . . we find on the one hand the same attempt, so evident later, to transpose Jewish content into Greek frames of reference, and on the other the subtle, but nonetheless very marked and significant, influence that the Hellenistic world had on the highlighting and the playing down of elements *within* the Jewish cultural heritage.”²¹

The Hellenistic *topoi* common to Philo and the Sages need not necessarily stem exclusively from the Greek milieu of the first century B.C.E./C.E. Many of them may have already been integrated into the Jewish cultural fabric long before Philo’s day. It is important to keep this in mind, even as we note what Louis Ginzberg long ago pointed out,²² that a study of Philo in the light of rabbinic midrash not only reveals him as a Jewish thinker with

a Greek education, but that even the apparently philosophic utterances of Philo reveal themselves on close scrutiny to be sound rabbinic doctrine.

One need assume no significant degree of overt and conscious Greek *paideia* in the education of the Sages who lived in Judea, Galilee, and Gaulanitis in Philo's day. Nor is the oft-posed question of whether they had a working command of the Greek language relevant. Just as knowledge of Hebrew was not necessary for Philo to have been "Jewishly literate," so too, a much better yardstick than language for the degree of Hellenization in the world of the Sages is to what degree their writings reflect recognition of and familiarity with the content of the classical authors, whether philosophical or literary, in the vernacular, not necessarily in their original language of composition.

Mutatis mutandis, while thanks to Cicero and writers both before and after him, educated Roman society in these terms must be considered Hellenized,²³ the world of the Tannaim, although it had long ago absorbed Hellenistic frames of reference, *topoi*, and so on, which had become an integral part of "authentic" Jewish tradition, was not "Hellenistically literate" in the sense of being familiar with Classic Greek and Roman authors even by name;²⁴ and this is so though many of the Sages must have had a speaking knowledge of Greek.

Philo and the Greek Philosophic Tradition

As for Philo and his philosophic frames of reference, in his use of Aristotelian and Stoic terminology to express Platonic thought, Philo was a man of his time.²⁵ In this, John Dillon and David Winston are of the same view as that enunciated by Harry A. Wolfson thirty years before Dillon²⁶ that, "By the time of Philo the vocabulary of men dealing with philosophic or religious topics was a mosaic of terms derived from all kinds of opposite schools of thought, but molded by their users, if they used them understandingly, to a common, consistent meaning." Wolfson, however, went far beyond this, propounding the thesis that it was Philo who bequeathed to medieval Western philosophy the conceptual matrix that it retained till the dawn of modern times.

As he explained it, while medieval philosophy on the one hand took over the Greek philosophic view of the structure and composition of the physical universe in its entirety, on the other hand its theory of knowledge, its metaphysics, its physics, and its ethics were revolutionized through the introduction of revelation, the causality of God, miracles, and God, as the source of morality: and that the first systematic formulation of this was in Philo's writings. Wolfson further argued that these ideas passed from Philo's writings into the philosophic thought of the Church Fathers, and thence into Muslim and eventually, medieval Jewish philosophy.²⁷

Although scholars are still unwilling to follow Wolfson in crediting Philo with such a profound contribution to Western philosophy, many are prepared to assign him a secure place in the gallery of Alexandrian Middle Platonism. In any event, whether, like Wolfson, one considers Philo to have been a philosopher of the first rank, whose ideas were a watershed in the philosophy of religion, or whether at the other extreme one considers him to have been a very minor figure in the world of philosophy, little more than a preacher who used philosophic clichés indiscriminately for homiletic effect,²⁸ it is undeniable that Philo “translated” the “truths” of Judaism as he understood them—Judaism both as a way of life and as a way of thought—into the language of Greek (and probably most will go further and define this more exactly as Middle-Platonic) philosophy. There is virtual consensus that Philo’s major objective was to present to his contemporary readers what he considered to be “normative” Judaism via the literary medium of midrash.²⁹

The Synagogue and the Beth Hamidrash— Channels of Cultural Interaction

That the traditional Synagogue and *Beth Midrash* of Palestine and the Greek-speaking Diaspora were important conduits for the introduction of traditional Jewish midrashic lore into the Hellenistic-Jewish Diaspora communities has been taken for granted, and not much thought is given to the likelihood that paradoxically, they were also one of the major channels for the transmission of Hellenistic ideas, thought patterns, categories, constructs and images into the cultural world of the Sages.

Functioning Jewish communities in both the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora had regular Sabbath Torah readings accompanied by sermons and homilies (*derashoth*) of local and visiting preachers (*darshanim*),³⁰ and the *darshan* had to find something new to arrest the attention of the audience, who were already familiar with the general outlines of the better-known midrashim.

Unlike *halakhic* traditions, homiletic/exegetic traditions were not expected to be relayed verbatim, but to be reshaped to catch the attention of the listeners and to fit the particular occasion and the particular audience present in the Synagogue or *Beth Midrash*.

Even if one never left one’s village—or never traveled further than Jerusalem, Yavneh, or Usha—there would be exposure to novel ideas, images, turns of expression, and so on, including those which originated in the Hellenistic Diaspora. Indeed, it would have been most surprising had this interaction not taken place, in view of the constant “coming and going” between the Land of Israel and the different Diaspora communities, of both scholars and laymen, who were invited as visiting dignitaries to be the “guest speaker” at the communal Sabbath Torah reading. Many

parallels between Philo and rabbinic midrash were very likely a function of this process, which had for centuries been channeling ideas, *topoi*, images, and idioms, into the world of rabbinic thought through the avenue of the weekly *darshan*.

Not only do we know that some of this material was written down, but it is attested in the Talmudic sources that the Rabbis used such “books of *haggadah*.” Philo also made use of such written sources. While parallels between Philo and rabbinic midrash do not necessarily indicate immediate mutual contact, they do reflect an ongoing cross-fertilization between Palestinian and Diaspora “teachers and preachers,” which almost certainly took place largely within the walls of the *Beth Midrash* and Synagogue.

In Conclusion

One of Philo’s major objects was to convince the reader to remain loyal to the commitment to the practice and observance of the traditional Jewish way of life, as defined and delineated in the Pentateuch and understood via “the traditions of the fathers.” At the same time, Philo’s constant Herculean endeavor to assign the highest Greek philosophical value to what he considered important in Judaism, heightens the awareness of the reader of the overwhelming degree to which he was both a product of, and a protagonist in, the Hellenistic culture of his day. In sum, we are justified in concluding that there is every reason to look upon Philo as a distinguished representative of the contemporary Alexandrian version of “normative Judaism,” and in spite of the language in which they were written, his works belong well within the scope of traditional midrashic study.

NOTES

1. A very good recent summary of the different views regarding Philo’s knowledge of Hebrew and of Palestinian *aggadah* and *halakhah* can be found in D. Instone-Brewer, *Techniques and Assumptions in Jewish Exegesis before 70 C.E.* (Tübingen: 1992), 202–204.

Probably the most recent and extensive brief for Philo’s use of Hebrew sources for his etymologies, is Hava Schur’s recent doctorate entitled *Hebrew Names in Philo’s Allegorical Exegeses*, (Heb.) (Tel-Aviv: 1991). Schur not only recognizes the existence of a midrashic tradition in Philo’s day with which he was familiar, but goes so far as to consider Philo’s Hebrew etymologies to be proof of his knowledge of Hebrew.

2. The most recent compendium of the remains of this literature is that of James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (New York: 1983) [= Charlesworth, *OTP*]; and see also, Carl R. Holladay, ed., *Fragments from Hellenistic Jewish Authors*, 2 vols., *SBL Texts and Translations 30, Pseudepigrapha Series 12* (Chico: 1983; Atlanta: 1989). While not all the works in these collections are relevant to our present concerns, whether for chronological reasons or their original language, I believe that they prove the existence of a significant body of such writings that should not be ignored.

3. Cambridge: 1940, 35.

4. Cambridge: 1927–30, 1966², vol. I, 322.

5. See Josephus, *The Jewish War* I 3 (LCL). I see no reason to doubt this statement.

6. Scholarship dates the earliest of these midrashic compendia to no earlier than the end of the fourth century, while most are considered to have been redacted much later.

7. Though some of the editorial principles are clear, it remains an open question whether these midrashic works are "compilations," or whether they should be considered to be "redactions." It has been suggested that if the latter is the case, then the correct frame of reference for the study of midrashic thought must be the larger units. See for example the programmatic article by Ithamar Gruenwald, "The Methodology of the Study of Rabbinic Thought," in the Hebrew journal, *Milet* (Tel-Aviv: 1985), 173–184. This is an only slightly veiled criticism of Urbach's methodology in his *Sages – Beliefs and Opinions*, which was at the time of publication, and probably still is, considered the last word in this area of scholarship.

8. Hence this material provides no clue as to whether contemporary preachers in Judea used rhetorical forms similar to those found in Philo's works. More often than not the extant midrashic compendia are composed of what can only be described as a stringing together of the desiccated remains of what must once have been rich and vibrant compositions.

9. Since *Zeitgeist* (the spirit of the times) strongly influences the choice of forms used for literary composition and rhetoric, a much greater degree of similarity in form between the two *corpora* is in fact quite likely. Two examples of this view: Borgen's *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo*, N.T.S. 10 (Leiden: 1965) compares the allegorical midrashic interpretation of "manna" by Philo and in John, leading him to posit a long homiletic tradition predating both authors and used independently by each of them. The recent book by James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House* (New York: 1990), posits the same view on the basis of his study of traditional midrash; and see particularly his statement of summary, 226.

10. An English translation of the fragments by J. J. Collins and A. Yarbro may be found in James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha II* (New York: 1983) and a Hebrew one in Yehoshua Gutman, *The Beginnings of Jewish-Hellenistic Literature* (Jerusalem: 1958), I, 276–286. For discussion, see Emil Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People*, New English version revised and edited by Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Martin Goodman (Edinburgh: 1973–1987), vol. III.1, 579–587 (incl. bibliography).

11. Though this term is considered problematic by many scholars, it has once again come to be recognized as reflecting a discrete reality that I would describe as the traditional "rules" and "ordinances" recognized by the rank-and-file of the community to be binding upon Jews committed to the proper fulfillment of the Mosaic code.

12. *Contra Apion* I 60.

13. This is my view regarding such non-rabbinic, sectarian writings as Enoch as well. Although they were written in what is now termed the "pseudepigraphic" mode, the authors of such books almost certainly wrote with honesty and religious integrity, albeit from a very different conceptual and psychological frame of reference. They did not consciously mislead their audience, nor was the audience misled in any meaningful sense. It is our thesis that in this genre neither conscious "dissembling" nor "lying" is the correct explanation for the phenomenon under consideration. See N. Cohen, "From Nabi to Mal'ak to 'Ancient Figure,'" *JJS* 36/1 (1985), 12–24.

14. In his review of Joseph Naveh, *On Sherd and Papyrus: Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from the Second Temple, Mishnaic and Talmudic Periods* (Heb.) (Jerusalem: 1992) in *Jewish Studies – Forum of the World Union of Jewish Studies*, 33 (1993), English Section, p. 83, Joshua Schwartz notes that "Naveh also shows that there is great affinity between rabbinic literature . . . and the epigraphical material at Masada . . . in spite of recent trends . . . to date the material of Tannaitic literature to the period of its literary formulation or editing, in the third century C.E. or so which would make it irrelevant to the Second Temple period, much of this literature does in fact reflect the reality of that period."

15. N. G. Cohen, "The Names of the Translators in the Letter of Aristeas, A Study in the Dynamics of Cultural Transition," *JJS* 15 (Spring 1985), 32–64, studies onomastic evidence which supports this hypothesis. Notes 1–6 contain an extensive bibliography of the literature about both the *Letter of Aristeas* in general and its onomasticon in particular.

16. I have refrained from citing other Jewish works written in Greek as evidence for this because of the lack of consensus respecting time and place of composition. For example, in his overview of the fragments of the Greek Tragedy whose subject is the Biblical account of the

Exodus from Egypt, Howard Jacobson, *The Exagoge of Ezekiel* (Cambridge: 1983), 5–17, surveys many different opinions respecting its venue. While I am of the view that it probably stems from third century B.C.E. Palestine (an hypothesis also brought, id. 7–8), and disagree with Jacobson's conclusion—which seems to me to be based on mistaken assumptions—there is no general consensus regarding any of the dates. R. G. Robertson, in Charlesworth, *OTP II*, 803–4, suggests the beginning of the second century B.C.E.

At the same time, in the light of the existence of this recasting of a Biblical narrative into the form of a Greek tragedy it is tantalizing to consider the thesis argued by Horace M. Kallen, *The Book of Job as a Greek Tragedy* (New York: 1918, copyright renewed 1959). Kallen suggests that the Book of Job was also originally composed in the form of “a Greek tragedy in the manner of Euripides” [Intro. vii], complete with choral interludes moved from their original place; and BT *Baba Bathra* 15a reports the opinion—although it argues against it—that the book was a literary parable.

17. Ben-Sira's Wisdom 3:21–24 (=19–22) rejects “hidden things,” and cf. BT *Hagigah* 13a, *Gen. Rabbah* 8:2, et al. While on the one hand, Jack T. Sanders, *Ben-Sira and Demotic Wisdom* (Chico: 1983, SBL Monograph Series, no. 28), brings evidence of Egyptian Demotic influence in Ben-Sira's writings, at the same time at least part of the work must have been composed after the transfer of Judean hegemony to the Seleucids.

18. This is discussed in some detail in my article, “*Taryag* and the Noahide Commandments” (*JJS* 43/1 (1992), 46–57).

19. The source of the better known, and to us more logical, combination of bones of the body and its *sineus* is the *Zohar*, Part I: *Vayishlakh*, 170.

20. Physical activity symbolized by “the bones of the body” refers to the body's performance of the “positive commandments” while the sun (= “the days of the solar year”) is a metonymous locution for “time's measure.” Note that the Stoic definition of time is “measured space”—see *SVF II* 509. The *Maharsha* [Poland 1555–1631] also expresses this idea, for in his comment to R. Simlai's homily on “613” in BT *Makkot* 23b–24a he writes that, “man's nature is a combination of ‘matter’ and ‘time.’”

21. N. G. Cohen, “The Names of the Translators in the Letter of Aristeas, A Study in the Dynamics of Cultural Transition,” *JSJ* 15 (Spring 1985), 32–64. Ibid. 62.

22. In his introduction to the notes to the first two volumes of his *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia; repr. 1985), vol. V, Intro., ix.

23. A. Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom* (Cambridge: 1975), 49, mentions the translation of foreign works into Latin, and notes in his closing remarks, “the creation of a common (Greco-) Italian culture in the Latin language” (149).

24. For a comprehensive treatment of the question, see Kurt Treu, “Die Bedeutung des Griechischen für die Juden im römischen Reich,” *Kairos NF* 15 (1973), 123–144. (This is available in English translation in electronic format in the archives of the *Ioudaios* discussion list presently located at: Ioudaios-L@Lehigh.edu, as TREU ARTICLE IOUDAIOS, where it is entitled, “The Significance of Greek for Jews in the Roman Empire” [transl. William Adler, August 1991].)

For general literature on the subject of Greek in Jewish Palestine, see the works of Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York: 1942), *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: 1950), and “How much Greek in Jewish Palestine” in *Biblical and Other Studies*, A. Altmann, ed. (Cambridge: 1962), 123–141 (repr. S. Lieberman, *Texts and Studies* (New York: 1974), 216–234); Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (Tübingen: 1973; Eng. trans. London/Philadelphia: 1974) I, 103–6; and also my articles, “Jewish Names as Cultural Indicators in Antiquity” *JSJ* 7/2 (1976), 97–128, and its companion piece, “The Names of the Translators in the Letter of Aristeas, A Study in the Dynamics of Cultural Transition,” *JSJ* 15 (Spring 1985), 32–64.

25. See J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (London: 1977), 122. “By Eudorus' time (viz. about a generation before Philo), the technical language of philosophy was largely uniform,” and at least to some extent “Philo was not so much constructing for himself an eclectic synthesis of all Greek philosophy . . . as essentially adapting contemporary Alexandrian Platonism, which was itself heavily influenced by Stoicism and Pythagoreanism, to his own exegetical purposes.” David Winston has followed Dillon in stating that this was “a highly Stoicized form of Platonism, streaked with Neo-Pythagorean concerns.” Also see D. Winston, *Philo of Alexandria*

(New York/Ramsey/Toronto: 1981), which contains a new translation of *The Contemplative Life*, *The Giants*, and other selections, including copious notes. On page 3 of the introduction, Winston refers to Willy Theiler, *Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur* (Berlin: 1970), 484–501, and Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, 139–183. For a survey of recent literature on the subject of Middle Platonism and Philo, see Peder Borgen, “Philo of Alexandria. A Critical and Synthetical Survey of Research since World War II,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, II 21.1. *Religion: Hellenistisches Judentum in Römischer Zeit – Philon und Josephus*, ed. Wolfgang Haase (Berlin/New York: 1984), 98–154.

26. H. A. Wolfson, *Philo, Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Cambridge: 1947), vol. I, 102.

27. See summary at the close of Wolfson, *Philo etc.* II, 456–457. The entire two volumes can be considered a masterful attempt to prove this thesis.

28. Valentin Nikiprowetzky, *Le Commentaire de l'Écriture chez Philon d'Alexandrie*, 11 (Leiden: 1977), 1–3, for a comprehensive survey of the differing assessments in the scholarly literature, as well as his “Note sur l'interprétation littérale de la loi et sur l'angélologie chez Philon d'Alexandrie,” *Mélanges André Neher* (Paris: 1975), 181–190, where he concludes that in *Specialibus Legibus* Philo is engaged “in justification, pure and simple, certainly not always of the literal sense, but in any case of the letter of the Law” (p.183), and id., “L'exégèse de Philon d'Alexandrie,” *RHPhR* 53 (1973), 309–29, where he evaluates Philo's philosophical stature as relatively modest. For a more radically negative view see Richard Reitzenstein, *Studien zum antiken Synkretismus aus Iran und Griechenland* (Bonn: 1921), 30; and Walther Volker, *Fortschritt und Vollendung bei Philo von Alexandrien* (Leipzig: 1938), 44, who looks upon his philosophical terminology as so much embellishment meant to impress his readers.

29. Thus for example, Jaap Mansfeld, “Philosophy in the Service of Scripture: Philo's Exegetical Strategies,” in John M. Dillon and A. A. Long, eds., *The Question of “Eclecticism” – Studies in Later Greek Philosophy* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: 1988), 72–73, writes that, “There is today a growing consensus that Philo was first and foremost, a deeply religious Jewish person who lived according to the Mosaic laws and whose primary objective as a writer and scholar was the faithful interpretation of Scripture,” and that it is this which “explains what is often called his eclecticism.”

30. See Yom Tov Lipmann (Leopold) Zunz, *Die Gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden historisch entwickelt* (Hebrew translation by M. A. Zak) (1892³) edited and updated by H. Albeck (Jerusalem: 1974), 164–165, and notes, where it is shown that this is amply attested by rabbinic sources, by the NT, and by Hellenistic-Jewish literature. Ezra Fleischer, “Annual and Triennial Reading of the Bible in the Old Synagogue” (Heb.), *Tarbiz* 61/1 (1991), 25–44 and particularly 28–29, states that the ancient synagogue was a place for the reading of the Torah and the Prophets, and the accompanying hortatory, homiletic and pedagogic activity subsumed under the term *Derasha*, and not for statutory prayer. Though it is doubtful whether this was indeed the sole activity, it clearly was the central focus of the gatherings. This is also evident from Philo's stress on study as the major aspect of the Sabbath gatherings—see e.g., *Vita Mosis* II 216; but note at the same time that Philo nevertheless terms these places “houses of prayer.”

Isaac Bashevis Singer in America: The Translation Problem

ANITA NORICH

Rabbi Yehuda said: "If one translates a verse literally, he is a liar; if he adds to it, he is a blasphemer and a libeller."

— Talmud, B. Kiddushin 49a

I sometimes suspect that the Universe is nothing but a bad translation from God's original and this is the reason that everything here is topsy-turvy. My cabalist theory is that the Almighty trusted Satan to translate His Creation and it was published before He could correct it. I am not going to make the same blunder.

— Isaac Bashevis Singer,

Address to Pen American Center, 1971

TRANSLATORS AND THEIR CRITICS ARE REPEATEDLY drawn to citing and glossing the Italian epigram "*traduttore, traditore*" [the translator is a traitor]. Translation seems inevitably to be an act of transgression in which violence is done to one language—to its culturally specific cadences and resonances—so that those who live in another language may find it less foreign. Translation results in a necessary, creative, but nonetheless regrettable act of betrayal; it forces an original text into hiding, compels that text to assume a new identity, and then presents it to a different audience as though no significant transformation had actually taken place. How, readers must ask, is the original text betrayed? Or is it a new audience that is betrayed, duped into accepting the illusion of sameness between an inaccessible source and a version of that source in their own language? Like the common reader, any scholar familiar with both source and target language will affirm that "something is lost in the translation," although what is gained may be ultimately far more impressive.

Yiddish enters into this perspective on translation in an acutely fraught manner. Neither an ancient language nor a modern language quite like other modern languages, Yiddish has speakers and a lively audience but it does

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not have either a national or political center. Yiddishists, as well as anyone interested in modern Jewish culture, still debate the question of whether Yiddish is a living language or a curious linguistic and cultural artifact preserved by small enclaves of those who resist its inevitable demise. It is a poignant, at times desperate debate, in which the stakes are extraordinarily high. More than raising questions about fidelity to a text, the act of translation seems to hint at the end of Yiddish culture by suggesting that it has no audience or future. Translation becomes, potentially, a form of obliteration. Never the language of any state, it has always been possible to see Yiddish as a quintessential wanderer only now at rest because it can no longer be activated. The old culture wars in Yiddish asked whether the Soviet Union, Poland, or the United States would be its natural home. These battles sought to locate Yiddish culture within a politics defined by socialism or territorialism or Zionism or secularism, to name only a few. But the debates about political or national centers for Yiddish culture have given way to a debate about survival itself. And, inevitably in modern Jewish culture, that debate evokes the Holocaust. Yiddish, in this context, can be understood as resistance, and translation as an act of collaboration in the destruction of a culture, a betrayal of the language in which it flourished and the millions who spoke it.

Yet at the same time, and in apparent contradiction to this view of translation as a kind of violation, the cultural valence of contemporary Yiddish suggests that translation, too, is an act of resistance to history. Increasingly, everything one does with or in Yiddish-speaking, reading, writing, teaching, translation, scholarship—will be understood as a defiant gesture aimed at preserving the traces of a culture that has undergone startling and dreadful transformations in this century. Faced with an indisputably declining population of Yiddish readers, we cannot ignore the likelihood that Yiddish texts may only continue to flourish in translation. This, in turn, places an extraordinary demand on translators to be meticulously accurate and utterly literal in their translations. Cultural politics, then, imparts an urgency to such demands that most translators will find daunting.

There is a popular view of Yiddish as a parochial culture, tied to a specific past that assimilation and physical devastation have decimated. Such a perspective, oversimplified and even mistaken though it may be, leads to another prevalent question: how can a Jewish language steeped in Jewish ritual and culture hope to be understood in non-Jewish languages? Although such concerns certainly contribute to the anxiety about what is lost in translation, they ignore the cosmopolitan, indeed, international nature of Yiddish literary production in this century.

Parochial in the sense that all languages and cultures are (that is, for a particular linguistic community), Yiddish literary culture was always in conversation with the cultures that surrounded it. Modern, post-Enlighten-

ment Yiddish writers were *without exception* multilingual, as were the vast majority of their audiences. The history of the Jews in Europe and America and the extent to which Yiddish speakers necessarily adapted other languages (Hebrew, German, Russian, Polish, or others among which they lived) underscores the extent to which a range of literatures and languages influenced Yiddish culture. Ironically, perhaps, the multilingual cultural exchange that has always been the norm in Yiddish may make Yiddish literature peculiarly adaptive to translation.

The very existence of translated texts cannot be taken for granted in Yiddish and is cause for both celebration and uneasiness. Nowhere is this more evident than in the writings of Isaac Bashevis Singer, the most well known and widely translated of Yiddish writers. Any consideration of his Yiddish and English publications must raise questions about the status of the English translations, their success and limitations, the liberties they take with Jewish terms that would have been familiar to a Yiddish audience but must be glossed for an English one. These considerations are always paramount in any discussion of Yiddish translation.

But, in the case of Bashevis,¹ we must also explore the degree to which the translations can be considered Bashevis's revisions of his own Yiddish texts, and even the extent to which Bashevis's Yiddish anticipates the English in which he knew he would be more widely read. In addition, we confront a writer who wrote different texts under different Yiddish names all of which are erased in other languages. Bashevis's Yiddish stories, like the journalistic pieces of his pseudonymous Varshavski or Segal, are often indiscriminately combined in English under the name Isaac Bashevis Singer. To complicate aesthetic matters still further, Singer was known to have worked closely with his translators and to have edited, shortened, tightened Bashevis's texts before they made their appearance in English. And subsequent translations into other languages have tended to use the English text and not its Yiddish source as the authoritative one.

Given the tensions surrounding the question of audience in Yiddish culture, these observations require further exploration. Objections to translations of Bashevis are paradigmatic of the objections to Yiddish translations more generally, but they are not primarily about a translator's competence or art. Rather, they point to a greater anxiety about the intended audience and the great divide that separates it from the milieu that is still within living memory. How can contemporary readers far removed from the *shtetl* or Eastern European Jewish life or even the immigrant experience understand texts emerging from those environments? How can a radically different sense of time and place be translated when we no longer necessarily mark time by the rituals of the Jewish cyclical calendar, or experience space as constricted? How can those who never went to *kheyder* or had anything like a traditional Jewish education hope to understand the allusions to traditional

Jewish sources that abound in the fiction of Singer and his contemporaries? Versions of these questions can easily be constructed for any discussion of the translation from one language and culture into another, but they take on new significance in this movement from Yiddish to English.

In effect, these questions about Yiddish and Jewish culture lament the loss of an ideal reader who, theoretically and practically, does not exist. The ideal reader would not only be someone educated enough to be a rabbi, raised in a Polish *shtetl* and city, but also one who had left these traditional sources and embraced Western culture. He (and this reader must obviously be a man) may be someone whose biography and sensibilities are very much Bashevis's own. More currently, this ideal may be replaced by the scholarly reader who can compare the English and Yiddish versions and explicate the allusions attenuated over time. But neither of these limited audiences can account for Singer's popularity and the readers he has reached in other languages. At least since the earliest translations of his fiction, Singer was not addressing those who knew at first-hand the culture he invoked but, rather, precisely those who did not. He is so widely read not because he renders the familiar, but because—whether through demons or imps or sexual license or realistic descriptions of the past—he emphasizes the strange and unfamiliar. He speaks authoritatively to readers who are so far removed from the Eastern European world he describes that they have come to long for it, to reify it as the source of their own authenticity.

Singer himself was fond of insisting that he never wrote with any reader in mind.

[I]f I did remember while I was writing that some of my readers were dying and others were not being born to replace them, it might have some influence on me. Writers, as a rule, don't think about their readers while they write. As a matter of fact, thinking about the reader is a terrible pitfall for a writer.²

And, when asked in the same interview if he thinks about those who will read him in a foreign language, he responded: "I take great care not to think about the reader in English or French or any other language. Nothing can spoil a writer more than writing for the translator. He must feel that he writes for people who know everything he knows—not for the stranger."³

This fundamental question of audience is also central to Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," arguably the founding text of modern translation theory. Benjamin also maintains that the writer should ignore the receiver of any work, that the reader is at most incidental to the writer in the creative process.⁴ An alternative view would argue that the reader is an essential part of any text, completing it and giving it meaning. These perspectives enter into the discussion of fidelity to an original text. If translators need not be concerned about what an audience will know or understand, then they are more likely to remain as faithful as possible to the

source language and its context. A greater freedom from the original can be tolerated if the translator's primary concern is the target audience and its knowledge and expectations. Even Benjamin and theorists after him conclude that absolute faithfulness to any original must be rejected in favor of a more nuanced literal rendition united with freedom from the original. "The task of the translator," Benjamin wrote, "consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original."⁵ Benjamin's perspective here is precisely that of a much earlier commentator, Maimonides. In "A Guide for the Perplexed," Maimonides wrote:

Whoever wishes to translate and purports to render each word literally, and at the same time to adhere slavishly to the order of the word and sentences in the original, will meet with much difficulty. This is not the right method. The translator should first try to grasp the sense of the subject thoroughly, and then state the theme with perfect clarity in the other language . . . 'so that the subject be perfectly intelligible in the language into which he translates.'⁶

It is difficult to understand how the problem of audience for Singer (or for any writer or translator) can be distinguished from the problem of "intended effect." Certainly, Singer's own claim to ignoring his readers in the creative process was disingenuous at best. As is often true of this author's pronouncements about his literary method, in interviews and writing he took positions that seem to contradict a claim to authorial innocence. He was insistent about his role in the translation process and the changes he introduced on behalf of the English reader. He was notoriously dissatisfied with most of his translators, changing them frequently, regretting the necessary losses a writer faced in translation, and asserting that the editorial process was central to the process of translation.⁷ He was unhappy about the translation follies of his youth when he rendered German, Polish, and Hebrew texts into Yiddish, but as he later lamented, "didn't work as hard on them as I should have."⁸ In this early period, Bashevis also translated the Norwegian writer, Knut Hamsun, via the German, thus already validating the later common practice of translating his own works through an intermediary language rather than the original.⁹ In America, when his stories and novels were translated into English, he often worked with collaborators who knew no Yiddish. His revisions were typically so extensive that Singer could claim the English version of his work as "a second original."¹⁰

The differences between the Yiddish and English texts certainly illustrate this attempt to address different audiences and the considerable attention devoted to editing and revising. Any number of examples suggest a similar pattern: Jewish religious terms are erased or glossed, lengthy and often repetitive serialized novels are shortened, whole episodes in the Yiddish may be eliminated in English. One impressive but not unusual

example of the scope of this pattern emerges from the translation of *The Family Moskat*. This novel remains (surprisingly, given the international interest in Singer) the subject of the most thorough comparison of Singer's Yiddish and English novels. I. Saposnik's "Translating *The Family Moskat*: The Metamorphosis of a Novel" examines Singer's creation of two different novels for different audiences. Saposnik underscores the English version's systematic exclusion of any reference to messianic faith, arguing that Bashevis found such belief inappropriate for his new American audience. The most dramatic difference between the two texts is that the Yiddish version is one chapter longer concluding, as Saposnik convincingly illustrates, with further positive or at least ambivalent references to the faith denied in the English version.¹¹

Any comparison between original and translated texts will underscore the extent to which the act of translation is necessarily an act of interpretation. *The Family Moskat*, the first of Bashevis's novels to be translated into English, certainly makes this point inescapable in the works of Singer. It has been made even more provocatively in the translation of Singer's most widely anthologized story "Gimpel the Fool" ("Gimpel tam," 1945; English, 1953). When Saul Bellow translated Singer's story in 1953, he introduced the Yiddish writer to a wider audience than he had previously known and extended to him the mantle of American literary respectability. Bellow's translation begins with a strong difference between the Yiddish and English. Bashevis's "*Ikhl bin Gimpl tam. Ikhl halt mikh nisht far keyn nar*" becomes Bellow's "I am Gimpel the fool. I don't think myself a fool." But the term *tam* invokes, as Chone Shmeruk has noted,¹² both the four sons of the Passover story (one of whom is a *tam*, a simple one) and a story by Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav about a wise man and a simpleton. Erasing the crucial distinction between *tam* and *nar*, Bellow elides the folkloric and religious resonances of *tam* as well as the numerous linguistic derivations from *nar* (Shmeruk, p. xxxv). Rather than regarding this as an error, however, we should consider the alternatives Bellow might have chosen. The most faithful translation of Bashevis's *Gimpel tam* would have been "Gimpel the Simple," surely an infelicitous choice for an English writer or reader. English synonyms might yield "Gimpel the innocent," or "Gimpel the naive" as translations of "*Gimpl tam*," all of them suggesting somewhat different views of Gimpel's character than the view Bellow chose when he called the story "Gimpel the Fool."

Singer, no doubt aware of this interpretive power of translation, insisted on his role as cotranslator following the publications of *The Family Moskat* and "Gimpel the Fool." In fact, although he had been in New York for fifteen years by the time the English novel appeared, he claimed to have learned English in the process of working on it.¹³ He would often take the opportunity to emphasize the collaborative activity in which he engaged with those listed as translators. Signing himself as I. S. (and thus expunging

the Yiddish Bashevis) in his 1970 "Author's Note" to *A Friend of Kafka and Other Stories*, he wrote: "I have translated these stories with the assistance of collaborators, and I find that I do much revision in the process of translation. It is not an exaggeration to say that over the years English has become my 'second' language."¹⁴ Despite this claim, of course, and despite the very extensive revisions he undertook, Singer never actually wrote in English. And, ironically, even if English were to be reckoned as a second language, its status had to be considered primary given the audience Singer increasingly addressed.¹⁵ It is no wonder that he worked so closely with his translators since he correctly understood his literary reputation and future to rest on the English texts they helped him produce.

George Steiner offers a discerning comment that may illuminate Singer's practice. Referring to those writers who have translated or collaborated on the translation of their own works, Steiner observes that when an author significantly recasts a text in the act of rendering it in another language, he or she may produce "a text which is, in many respects, indispensable to the original."¹⁶ There are, Steiner reminds us, original texts to which we no longer turn because "the translation is of a higher magnitude." Steiner calls such extraordinarily successful translation "betrayal by augment,"¹⁷ a term we might usefully apply to Singer's own collaborative translation efforts and his privileging of the English texts.

Neither a view of Singer's English stories as secondary and derivative versions of Bashevis's Yiddish, nor a view of them as edited improvements on novels that are often exceedingly repetitive and meandering seems apt. Rather, the Yiddish and English texts comment on one another, the latter reworking and sometimes completing the ideational and imaginative work of the former. The English clarifies the Yiddish but for a growing audience it also replaces the Yiddish as the definitive text. This is typical of the history of Yiddish literature in America, but Singer is remarkable among Yiddish writers in the extent to which he contributes to and validates this usurpation of Yiddish by English even as he suggests a different model. He can hardly be expected to celebrate the English triumph—and thus betrayal—of the Yiddish in which he always creates, but he is clearly willing to embrace it, to make it his own, and to give it equal standing. For scholars and those able to read both versions, "equal" denotes parallel rather than hierarchical status, but the popular audience cannot consider these texts alongside one another. Nor should they, since that would inevitably diminish both the Yiddish and English, suggesting that neither can stand alone, as they must.

Critics and scholars may be more concerned with the differences between the Yiddish and English texts than Singer or his translators were. Singer had little tolerance for the work of literary critics and he would most likely have been dismissive of the scholarly interest in comparing his works. In creating his "second originals" for a different audience, as we have seen,

he was primarily concerned with the new context and what he believed appropriate to it. His memoir *In My Father's Court* offers a provocative indication of what might have inspired some of these changes and the direction they took.¹⁸ When *Mayn tatns bezdn-shtub* appeared in the *Forverts* in 1955, it was signed by the journalistic pseudonym, Yitzhok Varshavsky. By then, the writer was the only survivor of his family, the final interpreter of his own family romance and of the Eastern European world on which it had been staged. The Yiddish text contains eleven chapters that are missing in English¹⁹ and the remaining chapters change the sequence of the Yiddish without offering any clear chronological or thematic ordering of events.

Despite the prevalent critical wisdom that points to Bashevis's willingness to depict Eastern European life in often quite literally naked terms, even exaggerating its perversions and ugliness, this memoir suggests that he may have been more guarded in English than Yiddish. While leaving a clear impression of the corruption and perversity that exists amidst the devout traditional Jews of Warsaw, Bashevis excises some of the most unsavory characters of the Yiddish text. He seems most concerned with erasing those scenes that reflect particularly badly on his parents. His father's extraordinary worldly innocence, his mother's unsentimental rationalism, and their less than ideal life together are central to many of these scenes. In the Yiddish but not the English text, he tells of the times when his father spent much-needed family money on publishing his own scholarly books (ch. 32). He discusses his father's attraction to anarchist philosophy which evokes messianic Judaism in its rejection of materialism and governmental authority (ch. 31). Also erased in the English is the case involving the ugly lame bride of whose physical appearance his father could not have been aware because, as a pious Jew, he refused to look at a woman (ch. 5). Bashevis creates a different set of decorums appropriate for a Yiddish and an English audience. The latter, more likely to romanticize the traditional world, is offered an idealized core of family reminiscences, one that privileges the view of a people "prepared to suffer in the name of spiritual purity" (p. 230).

Another illustration of the deliberate changes Bashevis wrote into this narrative concerns the depiction of his sister and mother. Devoting a chapter of his memoirs to their problematic relationship, Bashevis observes about his emotionally volatile sibling: "*Zi hot khoysht geven az di mame hot zi nisht lib. Dos iz nisht geven emes, ober s'iz emes az di mame hot zi nisht gekont fartrogn*" (p. 158). The published English translation distorts this forceful statement, rendering it as "my sister suspected my mother of not loving her, which was untrue, but actually they were incompatible" (p. 145). A more faithful translation would read: "She suspected that my mother didn't love her. That was untrue, but the truth was that my mother couldn't bear her." On the further reflection afforded Singer by revision and translation into English, he represses this less discreet assessment of

the relationship between Batsheva Singer and her daughter. Such changes should not be attributed to a weak translation or error but rather to the perspective the author assumes at a different time and with a different audience. Singer appears less *heykish* in the English version, more like a guest in someone else's home who is overly conscious of social niceties and appearances. It is almost as if we can hear, in this and other revisions, the inner voice familiar to Jews entering the wider world that warns "*s'past nit far di goyim*" [It's not fitting in front of non-Jews].

Surely it is fruitless to argue against such radical changes or to challenge Singer's authorization of them. Rather, they underscore the calculated editing he undertook as well as the vigorous nature of his relationship to his reading publics. This rejection of the notion of utter faithfulness to an original text extends not only to the self-translation of Bashevis and others, but to translation more generally. If we accept the views of translation as the creation of a new work of art and language as dynamic, then translations cannot be held only to the test of fidelity. In making this argument, Walter Benjamin further asserted that translations enter into the literary history of their target languages, informing and even transforming them. Certainly Singer's texts in translation have entered into the canon of Jewish literature in America and of American literature. (We might extend that claim to Yiddish literature in general but that is the subject of a different study.) The relationship is a mutually beneficial one, with Yiddish potentially influencing American and other literatures (Hebrew, in particular) even as it profits from its appearance in these literatures. As Renato Poggioli observes in a comment that recalls for us the contemporary situation of Yiddish: "In modern times, a national literature reveals its power of renewal and revival through the quality and number of its translators. Sometimes it is able to survive only because of their efforts."²⁰ Similarly, referring to writers of little known literatures—Kierkegaard, Ibsen, Strindberg, Kazantzakis are his examples, but surely Singer belongs in their ranks—George Steiner reminds us that "translation into a world-language can make a general force of texts written in a local tongue." More than that, he goes on to claim, "translation can illuminate, compelling the original, as it were, into reluctant clarity. . . . It can, paradoxically, reveal the stature of a body of work which had been undervalued or ignored in its native guise."²¹ Surely, this has been true of Bashevis and much of Yiddish literature as it is known in America.

The legend told about the first translation of the Hebrew Bible illustrates how an ideal translation may be attained. The Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Torah—was achieved when seventy-two scholars were summoned from Jerusalem, placed in separate rooms for seventy-two days, and emerged with exactly the same perfect translation. Divine inspiration, the legend indicates, ensured that this translation (or these seventy-two identical transla-

tions) was superior to the original. That is the kind of magic Singer would have liked but it is not a standard to which we can hold more worldly translations. The urge to produce equally precise renditions of the Bible has sometimes led, instead, to stilted, word-for-word literal translations that ignore grammar, syntax, and even meaning in the target language.²² The Septuagint did not reproduce the Biblical text in this manner, but rather sought to re-create it²³ as a comprehensible, harmonious work. That, surely, is a standard to which contemporary translations can be held.

NOTES

1. I follow the writer's own practice of signing his work Yitskhok Bashevis in Yiddish and Isaac Bashevis Singer in English translation.

2. Joel Blocker and Richard Elman, "An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer," in Irving Malin, ed., *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (New York: NYU Press, 1969), pp. 3–4.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

4. Benjamin's essay begins with this assertion: "In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. Not only is any reference to a certain public or its representatives misleading, but even the concept of an 'ideal' receiver is detrimental in the theoretical consideration of art, since all it posits is the existence and nature of man as such," Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," p. 69.

5. Benjamin, p. 76.

6. Cited in: Willis Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 153.

7. "There isn't such a thing as a good translator. The best translators make the worst mistakes," Singer, "On Translating My Books," *The World of Translation* (New York: Pen American Center, 1971), p. 110.

"For years I worked together with the translators on *The Family Moskat*. . . . Since that time I have taken part in the translation of every one of my books. I think only in this way can a translation come out bearable. I say 'bearable,' because you know just as much as I do that writers inevitably lose a great deal in translation," Blocker and Elman interview, p. 19.

Ruth Whitman expressed some frustration with Singer's relationship to her and other translators. His "method of working," she wrote, "is to translate with his translator, phrase by phrase, sentence by sentence." She also cites a 1968 interview in the *National Jewish Monthly* in which Singer said: "I go through my writings again and again while I edit the translation and work with the translator, and I see the defects of my writing while I am doing this," Ruth Whitman, "Translating with Isaac Bashevis Singer," in Irving Malin, ed., *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (New York: NYU Press, 1969), p. 46.

8. Blocker and Elman interview, p. 19.

See also: Stephen H. Garrin, "Isaac Bashevis Singer As Translator," in David Neal Miller, ed., *Recovering the Canon: Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), pp. 50–57. Garrin agrees with the author's own critical assessment of his translation skills.

9. For a bibliography of these early translations (and other work) see: David Neal Miller, *Bibliography of Isaac Bashevis Singer, 1924–1949* (New York: Peter Lang, 1983).

10. Conversation with Irving Buchen cited in *Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past* (New York: NYU Press, 1968), p. xi.

Seemingly in response to Singer's insistence on the importance of his English texts, Buchen began his study of the author with a provocative (and, no doubt, defensive) claim: "I decided to examine the works of Isaac Bashevis Singer in translation because Isaac Bashevis Singer decided to exist in translation" (p. ix). Most critics do not offer even this attempt at rationalizing their exclusion of the Yiddish originals.

11. Irving Saposnik, "Translating *The Family Moskat*: The Metamorphosis of a Novel," *Yiddish* (Fall 1973), pp. 26–37.
12. Chone Shmeruk, Introduction to *The Mirror and Other Stories* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979), pp. v–xxxv.
13. Blocker and Elman interview, p. 19.
- Singer worked with A. H. Gross on the translation until the latter's death; Maurice Samuel then assumed Gross's role.
14. The "Author's Note" to *An Isaac Bashevis Singer Reader* (1971), now signed I. B. S., begins similarly: "Though I write in Yiddish, I do most of the revisions of my writings after they have been translated into English by myself and a collaborator. Because of this, I can call myself a bilingual writer and say that English has become my 'second original.'"
15. Anita Susan Grossman puts the problem most succinctly when she reminds us that "it was not for his popularity among Yiddish readers that [Singer] won the Nobel Prize in 1978," Anita Susan Grossman, "The Hidden Isaac Bashevis Singer: *Lost in America* and the Problem of Veracity," *Twentieth Century Literature* (Spring 1984), p. 41.
16. George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (New York & London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 319–20.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 298.
18. Much of the following discussion of this memoir is taken from my article, "The Family Singer and the Autobiographical Imagination," *Prooftexts, A Journal of Jewish Literary History*, 10, no. 1 (January 1990), pp. 91–107.
- The text first appeared as *In mayn foters bezdn-shtub* in the *Forverts*, Feb. 19–Sept. 30, 1955. It appeared in book form in 1956 as *Mayn tatns bezdn-shtub*, and was reissued in 1979 (Tel Aviv: Farlag Peretz). Citations are translated from the latter edition. An English version of the novel appeared in 1962 as *In My Father's Court* (New York: Fawcett). Four installments, dated Aug. 13, Sept. 23, Sept. 24, and Sept. 30, appear in the *Forverts* but in no subsequent edition.
19. Singer later published four more of these chapters in *An Isaac Bashevis Singer Reader*. He added a curious and rather mysterious explanation for the late appearance of these chapters, claiming that they had been omitted from the translation of *In My Father's Court* "for technical reasons."
20. Renato Poggoli "The Added Artificer," in Reuben A. Brower, ed., *On Translation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p.147.
21. Steiner, p. 396.
22. "The interlinear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation," we read in Benjamin's provocative final sentence of "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin "The Task of the Translator," reprinted in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 82.
23. A number of scholars pose the problem in precisely these terms. For example:
 "We want a re-creation, not a reproduction. The shape of the original serves as what archers call point of aim. You do not propose to hit your point of aim, and if you do, you make a wretched shot, but you use it as the guide toward the mark you mean to hit but can not aim at directly," Richmond Lattimore, "Practical Notes on Translating Greek Poetry," in Reuben A. Brower, ed. *On Translation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), pp. 55–56.
 "The goal of translation is not to verify the translator's understanding of the sacred text but to produce a re-creation of it in another language," Barnstone, p. 41.

SARAH SINGER

Jephthah's Daughter

When Jephthah was asked to lead the army of Gilead against the Ammonites, he vowed to sacrifice whatever greeted him first out of his house if he were victorious. Instead of a lamb or a goat, it was his only daughter who was the first to approach him.

Garlanded,
Clad in gossamer
Laced with filigree,
I have waited all night
In the still weather,
Come forth to be
The first in Gilead
To greet my father
With dance and timbrel,
And songs of praise
Upon my lips.

At last, the herald's cry,
The sudden drum,
The clank of shield and spear!
I would make claim . . .
But look – my father weeps,
And rails against the sky
As I draw near,
And priest and warrior
Are dumb.

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Learning the Lessons of Studying Jewish Music

MARK SLOBIN

I HAVE BEEN ACTIVE IN JEWISH MUSIC STUDIES FOR over twenty years now, a long research cycle that has included three books and many shorter works. That experience leads me to these observations on the nature of studying Jewish music: a personal perspective by an American scholar who began his Jewish music studies in the early 1970s. My short account sketches a series of paradoxes and dilemmas familiar to Jewish music specialists, perhaps not startling in its revelations or confessions, indicating the situation of the field.

I eased into the study of Jewish music gently, following completion of a long cycle of work in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Why not try studying one's own tradition, I said to myself—let's see what they do in Yiddish music. Well, what "they" did on this topic in 1973 was—nothing. I encountered a highly motivated and articulate group of nonmusic researchers of my generation who had turned to the study of the Eastern European Jews, often, like myself, after working on other materials. These colleagues were very welcoming to someone working on music.

Paradox #1: This music could only be "seriously" studied (in the sense of modern ethnomusicology) after its population and cultural environment had been destroyed.

To explain what I mean by saying a certain kind of research had to begin after the fact, I must backtrack to the pre-1939 intellectual climate of European Jewry. A people under pressure, the Jews—particularly their intellectuals, chartered by the Enlightenment ideals of the nineteenth century that granted them that status—could not simply embark on "objective" study of their culture. Too many major decisions had to be made about their current place in European societies and their future course. An enormous continuum of ideology and politics from bourgeois secularism to socialism to left-wing zionism to religious zionism and orthodoxy meant that any statement about "who we are" and "where we're heading" was heavily weighted. A decision to study the secular Yiddish folksong was a political, often ambivalent, choice,

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whereas in the 1970s, it could be an ethnomusicological alternative. There were some exceptions in eastern regions: the music component of the Ansky folklore expedition, beginning in 1912, and the work of Moshe Beregovski in Ukraine in the 1930s produced ample data. Typically, however, most of Beregovski's work remained unpublished and it was only in 1994 that it turned out that the recordings of his and the earlier collectors' work had survived the ravages of history and might be salvaged from an archive in Kiev. Of course, the major cause of lack of scholarship on eastern European Jewish music was the annihilation by the Nazis and suppression by Stalin of the generation of scholars who might have done the work.

Paradox #2, which follows, holds that: Although the possibility of such research was now open, it was extremely difficult to undertake it.

Somewhere in the early 1980s a major publisher asked me to do a book on music as part of a new series in Jewish culture.

Dilemma #1: I spent some months pondering the issue of whether it was possible to write a serious study on the Yiddish-language folksong, which alone among European vernacular song traditions had (and still has) no monograph.

Basically I felt the answer must be negative, since all we have to go on are crumbs from the banquet: sketchy memoirs of a handful of surviving folksingers who live outside their original communities, principally in the United States and Israel. This is not to belittle the important collecting work done from the late 1940s through mid-1970s by Ruth Rubin, Ben Stonehill, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, among others. It is just that without the hope of a verifiable core sample or back-checking with a live community, it seemed a herculean, if not hopeless, task to understand the eastern Ashkenazic song tradition. Nevertheless, on grounds of representing a vanished world, I thought I should proceed anyway; when I contacted the publisher they told me they had changed their minds about a Jewish culture series, so I was not able to put my dilemma to the test.

Not only eastern European Jewish music is oddly positioned in our field of scholarship. All the formerly diasporic Jewish musics of a vast region from Morocco to India to China have been studied in irregular ways. The only early full-blown research project to assemble a significant set of examples was done by the German musicologist Abraham Zvi Idelsohn in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Paradox #3: Idelsohn did his work not in the homelands of those Jews, but in their doubly diasporic communities in then-Ottoman Empire, soon-to-be British Mandate Palestine, now Israel.

This is a variety of "fieldwork at a distance" different from my interest in reconstructing the Yiddish folksong in post-Holocaust times. Here we see the foremost pioneer of Jewish music collecting "exotic" songs and chants from groups like Daghestani and Bukharan Jews at a geographic remove from the potential field sites.

Basic to all Jewish musics is their close ties to the musical traditions of their non-Jewish neighbors. Among the farflung networks of Jewish communities, none was more interactive with local musics than the Sephardic tradition, composed of descendants of Jews driven out of Spain in 1492. Up through the early age of sound recording, Jews in the eastern Mediterranean mingled musically with surrounding peoples, to the extent of becoming early recording stars who performed non-Jewish materials.

Paradox #4: Yet this prominent aspect of their music-making was largely overlooked until very recently in favor of a concentration on a single genre—the romances—ballads that could be tied to the Sephardim's medieval Iberian roots.

To a considerable extent, the Sephardim were viewed overwhelmingly as marginal survivalists rather than cultural interactionists because of the romance of the romance. The recent flurry of activity around the quincentenary of 1492, along with the Iberian nostalgia for the vanished Jewish contribution to local culture, has only deepened the dependence on the Golden Age of Spain as the central marker of Sephardic culture, as ensembles in Spain and the United States make new arrangements and recordings of the old ballad repertoire. It might seem to present a subparadox that as the shared history of the Sephardim recedes (including their Judeo-Spanish language) and as non-Jews take up the old ballads, a Sephardic cultural profile projected purely through music emerges as a hallmark of the collective group. Edwin Seroussi nicely details this process in a recent article¹ in which he also points to the emergence of new popular song styles as the other major component of Sephardic musical, hence cultural, identity. This cultural continuity by way of either ancient canon or emerging pop is also somewhat paradoxical, but a normal outcome of the Sephardic fate: to be driven out of diaspora into ethnicity, all the while trying to hold on to a memory of pre-1492 life that has now been co-opted by outsiders.

Fieldwork with diasporic Sephardim reveals another side of their musical life. For example, in the early 1980s a student of mine, Michelle Shallon, interviewed an elderly gentleman in Seattle who proudly recalled how in his childhood classroom on the isle of Rhodes, he was better at Quran chanting than the local Muslim boys.

Dilemma #2: The mirage of Jewish music evaporates as you gaze at it, replaced by the vision of a group of Jews singing whatever they like, from any local source. Yet even while they share musical repertoires, memories, and tastes with non-Jews, they remain a people apart with a deeply internal sense about music.

We have only begun to tap into the rich resources of Jewish musical consciousness, as opposed to repertoires, although recent research has improved markedly in this area. Introducing a remarkable recent special issue of *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* (15/2, 1993), the editor Guy Haskell

observes that before now “ethnocentrism . . . had the negative effect of both skewing and romanticizing early observations of Jewish life in the East.”² This was corrected by “the past decade[’s] remarkable growth in the number of scholars of Sephardic origin studying their own culture and communities” (the interim stage having been non-Sephardic Israeli scholars studying Sephardic traditions). This layering of Jews from one tradition studying Jews from other traditions is one of the most characteristic features of Jewish music studies, marking it off from other varieties of ethnomusicological research.

Part of the problem, of course, lies in the undocumented nature of Jewish music—but that’s one of the paradoxes.

Paradox #5: Of the Euro-Mediterranean world’s musics, Jewish music has the greatest depth of information, considering the detailed data in the scriptural sources and continuous commentary on musical matters by rabbinic authorities, across both a huge geographic range and two millennia.

Yet we know next to nothing about the everyday practice of these farflung communities due to an intrinsic bias in the structure of religious life: beyond text, the central feature of preservation, tune, counted for little, so try as we may we can neither tie contemporary practice to scriptural times nor effectively understand the linkages among the extant communities. One might consider a corollary of this practice to be:

Paradox #6: Sometimes it is through the practice of non-Jewish music that we understand much about Jewish music culture, since from Bukhara to Morocco, as is well known, Jewish musicians took on the role of “official” carriers of Islamic court musics. Some Bukharan Jewish musical families I interviewed, for example, felt that all the music they play is Jewish. This poses a possible Dilemma #3 for scholars wishing to mark off definitive ethnic boundaries.

Such boundaries are defined from the outside as much as the inside, and outsiders can help create a group’s documentary record. After all, our first modern transcriptions of Jewish tunes come from European humanists of the Renaissance as part of their classical orientation: to them the Jews were a record of the past.

Here’s Paradox #7: The very region where the Yiddish language was born and where humanists first notated Jewish music was the site of the eradication of European Jewry. We might add here the fact that not only Idelsohn but his musicologist compatriots, students, and successors were largely German-born or German-trained musicologists, all of whom have contributed remarkably to our understanding of Jewish music. Paradoxically or not (for paradox is in the mind of the observer), many members of this Central European-origin scholarly cohort tended to study ancient or non-European Jewish musics until Israeli society began to gravitate towards adding a sense of ethnicity—what Americans would call “cultural pluralism”—to nationalism as part of a sense of Israeli identity.

Additional paradoxes and dilemmas arise when one turns to Jews of our own times and spaces. In the United States, social restrictions and institutional quotas on Jews were finally and fully lifted around 1960. In the racial/ethnic categorization of citizens, Jews are now included in the dominant white or Caucasian category, thereby making them, for perhaps the first time in Jewish history, members of the majority population. Ruled out of the fierce struggles over political and economic representation that characterize today's America, the Jews are nonetheless fully open to anti-Semitism anyway, a paradoxical situation indeed.

Musically, Paradox #8 might involve the nature of postminority music-making. Now free to become completely mainstream in taste, American Jews (like some European Jewish communities) have become connoisseurs of their own past, reaching out to old and non-Western sources for their secular and religious music.

But part of the paradox lies in their simultaneous outreach to current American pop fads as part of the deepest expression of Jewish youth music. Even ultraorthodox identity can be firmly grounded in transformed rock 'n roll songs. This constant interplay between "authentic" and "with-it" music-making forces the researcher to suspend any preconceptions about "identity" and to assess each concert, record, or religious service on its own terms.

Dilemma #4: how then does the scholar create a satisfying overall interpretation of this sort of community?

Generalizing from a few examples seems pointless, yet we lack the sociological sophistication to design research projects that can capture the pulse of a large population at once majority and minority, at once grounded and diasporic, tied not to an ethnic homeland (Europe being destroyed as a base), but to a newly created substitute homeland (the State of Israel) toward which the American Jewish community displays deep ambivalence.

The next largest Jewish diasporic population is in Russia, where many paradoxes mark the current cultural scene, and pervasive anti-Semitism coexists with broad Jewish cultural revival.

Paradox #9: In 1993 in St. Petersburg, I attended a concert by a touring group from the grimy industrial city of Samara (formerly Kuibishev) who very professionally played a wide assortment of Jewish music. Only two of the ensemble's members were Jewish, the others—notably the expert klezmer-sounding clarinetist—being Russians who, out of boredom with playing in the Samara Philharmonic and an interest in "exotic" music and occasions to tour, had picked up Jewish music.

By setting up a series of paradoxes, I have tried to show how hard it is to work on the music of an extraordinarily mobile, widely dispersed, and frequently persecuted "people" who cannot easily be defined by "homeland," "race," "ethnicity," "nationality" or "religion." While we have made great strides in

mapping the varieties and some of the histories of Jewish musics (notice the need for the plural) over the last fifty years; my effort has been to demonstrate how that project has been and continues to be difficult.

One of the ongoing problems is the lack of research power: in twenty-five years of teaching, I have supervised only three master's theses and two dissertations on Jewish music, and there are few (though excellent) replacements for the stellar generation of Israeli ethnomusicologists now or soon leaving active service. Considering how extensive the data are in Israeli and American archives—and also in recently opened archives in the former Soviet Union—perhaps a final paradox is that this extraordinary research opportunity will not be fully realized in the near future.

NOTES

1. "New Directions in the Music of the Sephardic Jews," in *Modern Jews and their Musical Agendas*, vol IX of *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 61–77.

2. Guy Haskell, p. 1.

Creation and Redemption: Towards a Theology of Creation

BERNARD OCH

CREATION AND REDEMPTION ARE THE TWO PILLARS upon which Biblical theology rests. They define the parameters within which the drama of Divine/human encounter unfolds. In considering the relationship between these two doctrines, it is important to note that the concept of creation has been largely eclipsed, even ignored, in modern Biblical theology. As a result, the Biblical text has been interpreted for the most part from an almost exclusively redemption perspective: Genesis has been read in the light of Exodus, and creation has been understood in the light of redemption and the giving of the law at Sinai.

Bernhard Anderson in his article, "The Earth Is the Lord's – An Essay on the Biblical Doctrine of Creation," writes,

When we open the Bible and begin reading from Creation toward the call of Israel, we are really reading the story backward. The creation accounts at the beginning of the Bible are written from the standpoint of the meaning disclosed in the event of the Exodus. In a profound sense the Bible does not begin with Genesis but with Exodus, not with God the Creator but with God the Redeemer. Only by reference to the crucial event of the Exodus did Israel know who God is and understand her calling as a people.¹

The centrality of redemption in Biblical exegesis received paradigmatic expression in Gerhard von Rad's seminal essay, "The Theological Problem of the Old Testament Doctrines of Creation."

Because of the exclusive commitment of Israel's faith to historical salvation, the doctrine of creation was never able to attain to independent existence in its own right. Either it remained a cosmic foil against which soteriological pronouncements stood out the more effectively, or it was wholly incorporated into the complex of soteriological thought.²

The purpose of this essay is to correct the injustice done to the doctrine of creation and reassert its centrality in Biblical theology and interpretation. I contend that the creation motif is not a "cosmic foil" of secondary importance, but is the fundamental theme which underlies the Biblical text, providing it with meaning and substance. My argument will focus on the Biblical text as it is written with Genesis as the point of departure. The very

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fact that the Bible begins with Genesis is, in my opinion, a literary fact of considerable theological significance. Scripture opens with a theology of creation and thereby provides a universal context for determining the meaning of everything that transpires in the entire Biblical narrative. The opening chapters of Genesis provide a protology for the history of Israel, and place the stories of the family of Abraham and of the people Israel within the framework of creation and world history. Accordingly, Exodus is to be understood in the light of Genesis, redemption and covenant as part of the unfolding drama of Divine creation.

Viewed from this perspective, Creation is not a self-contained, once-upon-a-time event but an ongoing dynamic reality which affects God's relationship to humanity throughout history. It marks the beginning, the *Urzeit*, the point of departure for all life and existence. The primary thrust of the creation account is to trace the origin and meaning of history and human existence back to the creative, sovereign will of God. By beginning with creation and primeval history, the Bible defines its scope. It points to a universalism that attributes to God everything that happens from the beginning to the end of time. It teaches that the God of the people of Israel is not limited by the boundaries of a specific people, but that God is the Lord of universal history, the Lord of the cosmos. Everything that subsequently transpires between humanity and God, and between Israel and God stands in this broad context. What begins at creation issues into Israel's history.

The creation of the world by God is no independent fact: creation is intended to be the opening of history. The Old Testament history of creation does not answer the question 'How did the world come into being?' with the answer: 'God created it', but answers the question 'From where does the history of God's people derive its meaning?' with the answer: 'God has given the history of His people its meaning through creation'. In other words, creation in the Old Testament does not belong to the sphere of natural science but to the history of man.³

The Biblical Concept of Creation

The Biblical creation account can be characterized as a process wherein God brings into existence or structures the order of creation. Through the imperative of command, primordial undifferentiated chaos is transformed into order and harmony by a series of separations and divisions. The first four acts of creation ordering the world into its time and space dimensions are described as separations. God separates light from darkness, day from night, upper waters from lower, water from dry land, and terrestrial light from darkness.

The process of creation is further delineated by the theme of limitation. Separation implies limitation, for the God who divides and orders the world into its component parts does so through the setting of limits and boundaries.

God's infinite power enables Him to establish limits for all of creation, thereby assigning to each part its fixed place and proper function within the created world. It is only as these lines of demarcation are established that order and harmony are realized. Should these limits and boundaries be disrupted, either by God or man, the created order would collapse and revert to its original state of confusion and chaos. With this thought in mind, we move on to the supreme act of Divine creation: humankind.

"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. . . .' so God created man in His own image, in the image of God, He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:26-27). The creation of human beings in the image of God is not a statement about the nature of humanity, but rather a description of their unique position vis-à-vis God: humankind is created so that something can happen between them and God. The *Imago Dei* describes the uniqueness of human existence by virtue of which the individual can enter into a relationship with God. The human being is regarded as God's counterpart on earth, the "You" who is addressed by God, and the "I" who is responsible to God.

This Divine/human affinity, not only determines the meaning of human existence, but also drastically alters God's relationship to the world. The creator God who has, heretofore, radically separated Himself from His creation now opens up the possibility of entering the world through His involvement with humanity. A Divine/human dynamic is set in motion which not only enables the Transcendent God to enter the time-space constructs of worldly existence but also provides humanity with the means to transcend the finite and limited structure of creaturely existence. Ironically, this is both the blessing and curse of human existence. In all other areas of creation, the limits and boundaries of each created object have been incorporated into its very essence and determine its life and destiny. The human situation is entirely different, for humanity's essential nature is contradictory, a combination of both creatureliness and Godliness: creatureliness, which establishes the limits of human existence; Godliness, which enables humanity to break these boundaries in an attempt to overcome our essential creatureliness. The paradox of human existence is that the human being contradicts himself within the terms of his true essence of being both a creature and a bearer of the Divine image.

The creation of humanity is the final act of God's creation. It begins with an announcement of Divine intent, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness," and ends with a proclamation of Divine approval, "and God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good." God is pleased with the totality of His creation, everything has turned out exactly as He had planned. This proclamation has a twofold thrust: it means that the basic structures and elements within the cosmos do not have to be redone or recreated in order to ensure the harmony and stability of nature. God's

creation is a wonderful cosmic order, which is without defect and harmonious in all its parts. It also implies that everything God has created is equipped with all of the essential characteristics needed in the fulfillment of its destiny. Everything belongs where it should be and functions according to God's creational plan and purpose.

In the creation account, Genesis 1, God has set limits and boundaries for all the objects of creation except for humanity. Man despite his createdness still remains outside of the essential constraints of Divine limitation. The final stage in the process of human creation takes place in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2-3), where God attempts to define the limits of human existence through the imperative of command. Through His word, God created the world; through His command, God now sets limits to the supreme object of His creation. The purpose of the Divine prohibition in the garden is *not to deprive humanity of any specific acquisitions* such as knowledge, consciousness, moral judgment, or sexual awareness, but, instead, to establish the boundaries of human existence. The Divine command in its entirety does not say "no" but rather "up to here," for humanity is indeed destined to actualize its Godgiven qualities of creativity, freedom and dominion, but only within the Divinely appointed parameters of finiteness and creatureliness. God has drawn a symbolic line around the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, a line which man is unwilling to accept. Adam's disobedience is motivated by his unwillingness to acknowledge the finiteness and dependence of his situation, his inclination to grasp a power and security which transcend the possibilities of human existence, and his desire to replace God as the source and center of his life. The sin of man is that he wishes to make himself God.

Adam's act of disobedience disrupts the order and harmony of Divine creation and unleashes antireational forces which enmesh man and nature in an ongoing process of decreation. This is the tragic irony of the Garden of Eden: intended to be the place of harmony and blessing, it has become the locus of alienation and curse. The Eden drama is a paradigmatic presentation of the two opposing forces which are continuously at work in human and worldly existence. Creation: harmony-order-Godcentered-blessing; Decreation: alienation-chaos-mancentered-curse.

Redemption as the Implementation of Creation

It is at this critical juncture of creation and decreation that the theme of redemption emerges as God's effort to repair the disastrous effects of human sin and disobedience. Redemption is the Divine activity that neutralizes and overcomes the antireational forces which threaten life and creation. It is an act of reconciliation and restoration: reconciliation between humanity and God, and restoration of the God given potential of all objects in the created

order. Redemption is understood as the implementation of creation and the actualization of the order and goodness of creation. Through redemption, God realizes those fundamental purposes for life and blessing inherent in the creation of the world. Redemption which was implicitly present in the wholeness of original creation now emerges as the counterpart to God's creational activity. Creation and redemption belong together as the obverse and reverse of the same theological coin; they are dynamically interrelated aspects of God's plan for the world. Creation is the end; redemption is the means. Redemption serves the creational goal by enabling humanity to live the life it was created to live. God's redemptive activity liberates humankind from the earthly forces of decreation so that humanity can reengage itself in the realization of God's creational plan. Redemption frees the creation to become what God had originally intended.⁴

The basic theological supposition of this creation/redemption dynamic is that creation is an ongoing, open-ended reality. God rests on the seventh day, but He, by no means, withdraws from His creative activity. The goodness of creation and the underlying Divine intention to bring into being and to fruition all aspects of life presuppose a kind of continuous creativity: it is a *creatio continua*, which is directed not only towards the preservation of what was once created, but also towards the fulfillment of that promise which original creation represents in its very self. God's unremitting creative activity, both preserves and innovates as it opens up new avenues of Divine/human communication and interaction.⁵

Although grounded in the original creation, God's ongoing creative activity must be distinguished from His initial creation. The *creatio originalis* is an exclusively Divine activity governed by God's will alone. The *creatio continua* is a joint enterprise between God and humanity, directed towards a future which is created by God and man in historical dialogical confrontation. Creation is, thereby, transformed from a cosmic act ordering the forces of nature into an historical event transfiguring the lives of individuals and peoples. Humanity enters upon the stage of history as God's partner/adversary, as the case may be, in an ongoing process of creation and redemption whose goal is the final reconciliation of humankind and God in creational harmony and blessing.

Noah and Abraham as Precursors of Sinai

The climactic act of redemption takes place at Sinai where God creates a people who will serve as the model and conveyor of blessing to all humanity. At Sinai, the destructive forces of decreation unleashed by man in Eden are neutralized and brought under control by a Divine/human act of restoration and recreation. Eden and Sinai are parametric events which set up a historical continuum on which the drama of creation and decreation is

played out. Sinai as the final event is preceded and prefigured by two prior acts of recreation: the Flood story and the Abraham cycle. Noah and Abraham are the two individuals chosen by God to reinstate the original creational blessings. The flood narrative is the classic example of the creation/decreation/recreation syndrome. As punishment for human violence and corruption, God returns the earth to its primordial watery chaos. The boundaries and limits of creation are obliterated as the earth reverts to its original chaotic formlessness. Humankind, through violence and wickedness, destroys the fabric of human life and community; God completes the process of disintegration by destroying the structure of human existence. Ironically, man and God who were destined to be partners in creation have now become accomplices in decreation.

The flood story, however, marks not only an end but also a beginning, a new creation which is based on God's covenant with Noah. Anticipated at the beginning of the flood (Genesis 6:18) and established at the end (Genesis 9:8–17), the covenant provides a thematic bracket to the entire flood episode. The covenant is presented as the counterpoint to the flood: the life-giving restoration of the covenant is contrasted to the total devastation of the flood. Each act of recreation—Noah, Abraham, Sinai—is accompanied by an act of covenantal bonding. Covenant is the historical counterpart to the creational *Imago Dei*. They are parallel realities expressing the nearness of God and the unique relationship to God which is humanity's preordained destiny. The covenant is only possible within the framework of creation and serves a creational goal, the ultimate reconciliation of God and humanity. Just as the Creator committed Himself to humankind through the original creation, so He recommits Himself through the covenant to certain individuals and a specific people.

Despite the fact that the flood disaster has had no effect whatsoever on human nature and behavior God enters into a covenant with Noah. Man has not changed, God has! God promises that He will never again be provoked by human misbehavior to destroy the order and regularity of nature. God's promise is unilateral and reaffirms His commitment to creation without any reciprocal demand. The covenant with Noah is a covenant of restoration and anticipation, not reconciliation. It is directed towards the future: by restoring and maintaining the natural order, God guarantees a world in which His historical, redemptive activity can move on towards its ultimate goal of Divine/human reconciliation. The Noah covenant is the first step on a journey of redemption which will eventually lead to Sinai.

Humankind has not changed, and so the flood is followed by a resumption of the destructive forces of human behavior, culminating in the Tower of Babel episode which marks the final stage of decreation in the primeval period, and corresponds to the initial act of transgression in Eden. In both stories, the individual and humankind as a whole are guilty of

overstepping the limits of human creaturely existence. The building of a tower, like the eating of a forbidden fruit, is an attempt to replace God as the center of human life by acquiring security and independence in separation from God. God responds to man's desire to attain autonomy and power by destroying the unity of humankind. God's punishment underlines the basic teaching of the primeval period: man must learn his limits; the unbridled drive for power and security is ultimately counterproductive and results in death, destruction, and alienation.

The dispersion and confusion at Babel are the human counterpart to the chaos and confusion of the flood. Once again, the earth is in chaotic disarray. Once again, there is a breakdown of order and harmony, this time not in the realm of nature, but in the area of human life and existence. The transference of chaos from the cosmic to the human sphere has a profound effect on God's subsequent behavior. In the aftermath of the flood, the order and regularity of nature were reestablished by Divine decree. After Babel, the restoration of unity and harmony will no longer be an exclusively Divine prerogative but will depend upon a joint Divine/human redemptive activity. God needs man as the agent through whom the goal of creation will be actualized in the context of human history and existence.

The Creation of Israel

With this purpose in mind, the Biblical narrative moves on to the second stage of recreation and redemption. Out of the chaos of human existence, God chooses one individual to father a people whose mission will be the reunification of humankind through acceptance of Divine authority and obedience to Divine command. The history of Israel, therefore, begins with a command.

Now the Lord said to Abraham, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, and be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth will bless themselves." (Genesis 12:1-3)

The call to Abraham is God's creational response to the process of decreation which has brought destruction and disunity upon humanity. It signifies a new step in the process of recreation which began after the flood. With Noah, God reinstituted the blessing of procreation and reestablished the ongoing structure of nature; with Abraham, God reinstates the original creational relationship with humankind based on Divine command and human obedience. For this purpose, God must create a new being who will serve as the mediator of blessing to "all the families of the earth." Benno Jacob in his commentary emphasizes the creation motif in God's charge to Abraham. "The words 'be a blessing' have been rightly seen as a command

by God to history, in the manner of his words at creation. Through Abraham a new world is called into being.”⁶

God’s call to Abraham is formulated in words and arts reminiscent of the original cosmic creation. In both instances, creation entails an initial state of chaos out of which the created object emerges through acts of separation and differentiation. With Abraham, the original chaos is now applied to human existence, as Abraham is commanded to separate himself from all the ties and bonds which connect him to the chaotic confusion of human life after Babel. The call to Abraham is more than a test of obedience; it is a sign of his entrance into a new realm of being. At the age of 75, Abraham stands before God as a *tabula rasa*: a man without country, kindred or parental ties—a man without a past. Abraham removes himself from the natural time-space constructs of human existence so that he can enter into a new state of being, as the recipient of Divine promise and blessing. To all intents and purposes, Abraham has been reduced to a kind of “non-being” out of which he will be recreated by the command of God and refashioned in the image of God. Walter Brueggemann in his commentary on Genesis writes,

The purpose of the [covenant] call is to fashion an alternative community in creation gone awry, to embody in human history the power of the blessing. It is the hope of God that in this new family all human history can be brought to the unity and harmony intended by the one who calls. . . . The call to Sarah and Abraham has to do not simply with the forming of Israel but with the reforming of creation, the transforming of the nations.⁷

God’s covenant with Abraham goes far beyond and fulfills His previous covenant with Noah. The Abrahamic covenant is one of reconciliation as well as restoration and signifies the reestablishing of communication between man and God. Taken out of the land of confusion and chaos, Abraham is placed on a road which leads to the land of reconciliation and reunification with God. The road from Haran to the land of Canaan symbolizes the return of humanity to Eden and to God. Abraham and the promised land provide the counterpoint and answer to Adam and the Garden of Eden. In both instances, possession of the physical space granted to man depends entirely upon obedience and trust in God. Where Adam failed, Abraham succeeds, “And Abraham believed the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). This pronouncement of belief expresses Abraham’s complete trust in God and his acceptance of the Divine plan for himself and his people. The original relationship between God and humanity which was broken by Adam’s disloyalty and disobedience is now restored by Abraham’s trust and obedience.

Abraham occupies a pivotal position in the Biblical drama of creation and redemption. He provides not only an answer to the broken relations of the past, but also a paradigmatic model for the future. The Abraham narrative

presents a microcosmic description of the history and destiny of Israel and sets forth the basic characteristics of its existence before God. Like Abraham, the people of Israel will be taken from the family of nations and placed on a road whose direction and destination lie entirely in God's hands, a road which leads to a new land and a new existence. The Exodus from Egypt, like the "exodus" from Haran unfolds within the parameters of creation and redemption and leads to the final act of Divine/human reconciliation at Sinai. The words addressed to Abraham, "I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans" (Genesis 15:7) will echo forth from Mount Sinai, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 20:2).

Exodus/Sinai as the Renewal of Creation

Exodus/Sinai marks the moment and place God has chosen for His ultimate act of restoration and reconciliation. The Exodus from Egypt is to be primarily understood not as an act of liberation and redemption but as an act of creation. Through liberating events (Exodus) and a covenant commitment (Sinai), God engages in a *creatio nova*, a new creation which is the culmination and consummation of His original act of cosmic creation. The creation of a people is the final event in a process of creation which began with the formation of heaven and earth. Israel is the historical counterpart and completion to cosmic creation. The Creator God now appears as the Redeemer God whose creative power extends into history, not for the purpose of redoing cosmic creation, but for the purpose of creating a people who will mediate the presence of God to the world.

The creation of Israel is modeled upon the original creation and describes how a people is created out of historical "nothingness." During the bondage in Egypt, Israel becomes a "no people"; a people divested of those elements which define and shape its identity: land, culture, history. The four hundred years of slavery represent a *reductio ad nihilum* out of which God creates a people through events as awesome and spectacular as the acts of cosmic creation (Exodus 15). This historical *creatio ex nihilo* is of crucial importance in defining the nature of Israel's relation to God and humanity. It elevates the people of Israel to a position of cosmic importance in God's overall plan for the world. Although the liberation of Israel is the focus for God's activity, it is not the ultimate purpose. The act of redemption is ultimately for the sake of all creation. What is at stake is God's mission for the world, which will now be realized through the life and history of one people. Israel is not only chosen by God to serve as the mediator of blessing to humanity; it is, in fact, created by God for this purpose. Israel's creation is its election. This is the uniqueness of Israel: a people whose essence precedes its existence; a people which has a reason for being before it has a being; a people that can never take its existence for granted, but must

always evaluate its existence by its essence. The creation/election theme has its reverse side for it contains a veiled threat. Should Israel turn away from God, it would forfeit its right to exist as God's people and revert to the initial status of a "no people." "And the Lord said, 'Call his name Not My People, for you are not my people and I am not yours'" (Hosea 1:9). By denying its essence, Israel forfeits its existence.

Surprisingly, yet significantly, the Exodus narrative does not begin with the enslavement but with an announcement of fruitfulness and greatness. "The descendants of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly, they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong; so that the land was filled with them" (Exodus 1:7). These words describe not only the fulfillment of Patriarchal promise but also the realization of God's creational intentions for all humankind, "And God blessed them, and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth'" (Genesis 1:28). What is happening to Israel in Egypt is nothing less than a microcosmic fulfillment of God's macrocosmic plan for the world. Israel is the starting point for the enactment of God's creational intentions for all humanity. Ironically, this act of blessing for Israel is an omen of disaster for Pharaoh. Pharaoh's decision to enslave the people has both an historical and creational impact. It is an attempt not only to restrain Israel's growth so as to avoid a future threat, but also, and primarily, an attempt to subvert God's creational work within the people of Israel.

Enslavement is chaos: it is life cut off from God's presence and subject to self-centered human will and domination. Egypt is to be seen as the historical embodiment of the forces of human decreation threatening to thwart God's creation. The Exodus drama is played out on both a historical and metahistorical level. Pharaoh appears not only as a human tyrant but also as the incarnation of those antireational forces which refuse to recognize God's supremacy and authority. He is the classic example of man's unwillingness to acknowledge his creatureliness and dependence upon God, and his consuming drive for a power and security which go beyond the limits of human existence. The Midrash speaks of Pharaoh's opposition to God and his subsequent punishment as a warning to all future tyrants:

Pharaoh never died and never will die. He always stands at the portal of hell, and when the kings of the nations enter, he makes the power of God known to them at once in these words, "Oh you fools! Why have you not learned knowledge from me? I denied the Lord God, and He brought ten plagues upon me, sent me to the bottom of the sea, kept me there for fifty days, released me then, and brought me up. Thus I could not but believe in Him."⁸

On the metahistorical level, the real issue is not slavery versus freedom but human servitude versus Divine service—Who shall be the master of Israel? On this point, the Biblical teaching is clear: servitude to man is the antithesis

to service to God. Pharaoh himself presents the issue very succinctly, “Who is the Lord that I should heed His voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go” (Exodus 5:2). The opposition of Pharaoh is the archetypal opposition of human power to the claims of Divine sovereignty. Terence Fretheim in his commentary on Exodus writes,

The Exodus does not constitute a declaration of independence, but a declaration of dependence upon God. Exodus moves from one kind of slavery to another, from bondage to Pharaoh to the service of God. One cannot bypass Sinai on the way to the promised land. Only God can be Lord, can lay claim to life in such a way that true freedom is the result. Within such a relationship, as in every genuine commitment, there is real freedom. When this happens, creation becomes what God intended it to be.⁹

The battle lines have been drawn: man versus God, human tyranny versus Divine sovereignty, decreation versus creation. The conflict between God and Pharaoh involves human and nonhuman forces. God reacts to Pharaoh’s anticreational designs by unleashing forces of nature to punish and destroy. The moral chaos of human enslavement is countered by the natural chaos of Divine retribution.

Given the anticreational forces incarnate in Egypt and Pharaoh, no simple local or historical victory will do; God’s victory must be and is cosmic in scope. God, therefore, fights with “weapons” appropriate to the enemy; it is God’s activity in creation—the use of nonhuman rather than human forces—that conquers chaos. God’s redemption is an overcoming of anticreational forces at every level including the cosmic.¹⁰

By effecting the deliverance of Israel through a series of natural disorders and disasters, God elevates His victory over Pharaoh into an event of cosmic importance, especially at the Red Sea where the enemy sinks to a watery grave in a miniature reenactment of the original flood catastrophe. Throughout the land of Egypt, the order of creation is disrupted as forces of nature and living things break out of their properly circumscribed boundaries. Water and blood intermingle, light and darkness are no longer separated, everything is spilling and swarming out of its proper category and number. The ten plagues symbolize a return to primeval chaos in that place on earth where God’s creational intentions were moving toward realization. A precreational darkness has descended upon Egypt.

Out of this chaos and confusion, Moses leads the people to the Red Sea where God’s final victory over Pharaoh takes place. And once again, creational and cosmic events dominate the scene. The crossing of the sea is a microcosmic reenactment of the original act of creation. In both events, the separation of waters and the emergence of dry land are part of the Divine process of creation, historical as well as cosmic. The Divine creative act in the sphere of nature sets up the framework for the liberation and creation of a

people. In the final analysis, it appears poetically just that the waters through which the oppressed people is liberated are the same waters within which the oppressor people is destroyed. Even more, the drowning in the Red Sea as well as the killing of Egyptian males prior to the Exodus invert the earlier punishments inflicted by Pharaoh on the people of Israel. The victory of the pro-life creational forces over the anti-life decreational forces is now complete.

The Unique Relationship of God to Israel

In delivering Israel from bondage, God has not only created a new people but also reestablished the original relationship with humankind which existed on the sixth day of creation. By separating the people of Israel from the other nations, God has set apart and sanctified Israel to stand before Him as His agent and representative to the world. The separation of Israel from the nations has the same cosmic importance as the separations through which God first brought order out of chaos. The words, "You shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from other peoples, that you should be Mine" (Leviticus 20:26) point to a unique symbiosis between God and Israel reminiscent of the creational bond which existed between God and man. Sanctified by acts of distinction and separation, the people of Israel assumes the role which was originally assigned to humanity at creation. The image of God corrupted by countless acts of disobedience and violence is now reinstated in the life of a people created by God for this specific purpose. "For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God, you shall therefore be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:45).

The bond between God and Israel is one of mutual exclusivity. Both God and Israel have been set apart from other nations; they now belong one to the other. "And I will make my abode among you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God and you shall be My people" (Leviticus 26:11-12). The implied corollary to God's demand that Israel shall have no other gods is God's commitment that He will have no other people. Through His accessibility to and involvement in the life of Israel, God has reentered the realm of human existence. God not only participates in but also becomes a part of the history of the people of Israel. This Divine/human symbiosis is strikingly described in a Midrash on the verse, "You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and I am God" (Isaiah 43:12): "That is, if you are My witness, I am God, and if you are not My witness, I am, as it were, not God."¹¹ God, "as it were," depends on the witness of Israel, without which His Divinity is not realized. The actualization of the full potential of God requires the testimony of His special people. Like the heavens above, Israel has been created to acclaim and bear witness to God. The creation of Israel is as fundamental to cosmic order and harmony as the original creation of heaven and earth.

God's commitment to Israel is grounded in the very schema of creation; it is as secure and inviolable as the changeless order of nature. "Thus says the Lord who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, 'If this fixed order departs from before Me, then shall the descendants of Israel cease from being a nation before Me forever'" (Jeremiah 31:35–36). The existence of Israel is not subject to the flux and fortunes of history, but is basic to the order of creation against which history plays out its drama, and derives its meaning. God's relationship to Israel is one of reciprocity: the people of Israel is witness to the existence of God; the created order is witness to the eternity of Israel. "His descendants shall exist forever, his throne as long as the sun before me. Like the moon it shall be established eternally, a reliable witness in the clouds" (Psalms 89:36–37).

Sinai as the Completion of Creation

The stage is now set for the final event in the drama of creation and redemption. The journey of man which began at the Garden of Eden moves on to its ultimate destination: Mount Sinai. The theophany at Sinai marks the culmination and fulfillment of God's creational plan. The encounter between God and Israel at Sinai can be seen as a return to beginnings, an iterative event which is a reenactment of the original encounter between God and man at Eden. For this purpose, God has created a new people to stand before Him at Sinai as Adam stood in His presence at Eden. What began at Eden is now completed at Sinai. At Sinai, the people of Israel are called on to become participants in the renewal and maintenance of the created order.

The Midrash in hyperbolic fashion states that the whole of creation was dependent upon Israel's acceptance of the Torah at Sinai.

God said to the objects of creation, "If Israel accepts the Torah, you shall continue and endure, otherwise, I shall turn everything back into chaos again." The whole of creation was thus kept in dread and suspense until the revelation at Sinai, when Israel received and accepted the Torah, and so fulfilled the condition made by God when He created the universe.¹²

The incompleteness of the original creation is fully resolved at Sinai with the constitution of a people bound to God in creational unity. The theophany at Sinai emerges not as the outcome of God's act of deliverance but, primarily, as the extension into human existence of God's cosmic plan and purpose.

The interplay of historical and creational themes permeates the entire Sinai event. God's call to Moses to ascend the mountain is preceded by a period of six days, which alludes to the six days of cosmic creation. "The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai; and the cloud covered it six days; and on the seventh day He called to Moses out of the midst of the

cloud. And Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain” (Exodus 24:16–18). On the climactic seventh day, Moses ascends the mountain to receive the Torah which is referred to as the Tree of Life, “She is a tree of life to them that hold fast to her” (Proverbs 3:18), and corresponds to the original Tree of Life from which Adam and Eve were separated. This act of initial separation is now canceled by the Torah which provides life and sustenance to the people of Israel. “See I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God . . . then you shall live and multiply and the Lord your God will bless you” (Deuteronomy 30:15–16).

In another Midrash, the Ten Commandments are elevated to a position of cosmic as well as historical importance.

The Ten Commandments, which God first revealed on Mount Sinai, correspond in their character to the ten words by which the world was created. The first commandment: “I am the Lord thy God,” corresponds to the first word of creation, “Let there be light,” for God is the eternal light. . . . Not only the words but also the very tablets on which they are engraved are of Divine origin. They were created by God’s own hand in the dusk of the first Sabbath at the close of creation.¹³

The revelation at Sinai provides access to God and opens up creation for humanity. The Torah revelation is a new creation providing order and harmony within the social cosmos. At Sinai, a law is revealed whose purpose is to actualize creational order and harmony in historical time. At Sinai, the order of creation is given social and historical expression. Just as cosmic order was achieved through a series of separations that must be maintained if cosmic order is to continue, so also, human life and society are established with boundaries and separations that must be maintained if human chaos is to be avoided. The covenant law revealed at Sinai is the means by which the cosmic and human orders can be harmoniously integrated. It provides a blueprint whereby God’s creational plan can be realized in all spheres of human life and existence. Israel joins God as a coworker in the ongoing actualization of creation. At Sinai, God has once again set the world in order; it is Israel’s task to ensure that this right order will be maintained and renewed through obedience to God’s laws and commandments.

Fretheim in his article on redemption and law describes this symbiotic relationship between the cosmic and social orders.

The law belongs to the sphere of creational thought. Negatively, an offense in the legal realm obviously has effects in the realm of nature (drought, famine) or in the political sphere (threat of the enemy). Positively, the law is a means by which the Divine ordering of chaos at the cosmic level is actualized in the social sphere, brought into closer conformity with the creation God intended. Thereby God’s will is done on earth as in heaven, and the cosmic and social orders are harmoniously

integrated. Israel by attending to its relationship with God and to the commands given at Sinai, grows towards God's intention for the human, indeed the entire world, laid out in creation. . . . Sinai reiterates for those redeemed the demands of creation.¹⁴

The classic example of Divine/human interaction is to be found in the Sabbath command. "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God . . . for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day" (Exodus 19:8-11). The Sabbath is that point in time where God and man meet. On the seventh day of creation, God joined Himself and His eternal presence to His temporal creation, to the world of man. On the Sabbath day, man not only recalls but also participates in an act of cosmic creation. Through an act of *Imitatio Dei*, he experiences the original structuring of time within the microcosm of his own life. He brings the rhythm of his own life into tune with the rhythm of the cosmos. The observance of the Sabbath links humanity to a divinely ordained future as well as a divinely created past. Sabbath observance has cosmic implications: not only is it a foretaste of an eschatological future but also its effective cause. "If Israel were to celebrate only one Sabbath properly, the Messiah would immediately come."¹⁵ The Sabbath is a prefiguration of the final phase of Divine/human reconciliation. In pointing back to the beginning, it also points to what is yet to be, to the final destiny to which all creation is moving.

The Sabbath and the Exodus are the two paradigmatic examples of liberation found in the Bible. The Exodus from bondage is the symbol of external liberation; the Sabbath is the symbol of inner freedom. Observing the Sabbath means freeing oneself from the endless drive to remake the world in the image and likeness of man. It means acknowledging God as the source and center of human life. The Sabbath as a mimetic reenactment of the original seventh day proclaims the incontestable sovereignty of God, and the everlasting covenant between God and Israel. On the Sabbath day creation and covenant intersect.

Say to the people of Israel, "You shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. Wherefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign forever between Me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He rested." (Exodus 31:13, 16-17)

At Sinai, Israel is separated from the other nations, restored and recreated in the image and likeness of God. Through the covenant at Sinai, God reaffirms the original blessings of life and prosperity which will now be realized in the life of a people dwelling in the land promised by God to its

forefathers. The land of Canaan is Eden recaptured; a “paradise” on earth. It is a land “flowing with milk and honey,” a place of abundance and plenty.

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs . . . a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing. . . . And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land He has given you. (Deuteronomy 8:7–10)

Settlement in the land of Canaan has creational implications: the abundance of Canaan cancels the curse which God has placed on the earth as punishment for Adam’s act of disobedience. The earth which was condemned to barrenness and infertility now reverts to its original state of fruitfulness and productivity. In all the earth, the land of Canaan is the place chosen by God to serve as the sacred center from which the creational blessings restored at Sinai will flow into the stream of human life and history.

Alienation and Reconciliation

The story line which moves from Creation to Sinai is, however, tragically flawed by an act of transgression which occurs at the very moment of Divine/human reconciliation. The revelation at Sinai is not only an event of restoration but is also a reenactment of man’s initial turning away from God. Once again, Divine creation is followed by human decreation. Once again, the very location chosen for Divine/human unification becomes the place of sin and punishment. The building of the Golden Calf like the eating of the forbidden fruit is but another example of mankind’s never ending drive to acquire Divinity by exceeding the limits of human, creaturely existence. At Eden, man wished to become like God by elevating himself to a position of independence and authority. At Sinai, the intention is the same but the direction is reversed. Rather than elevating itself, the people intends to bring God down to earthly proportions by reducing Him to an object created by man. The Golden Calf is a violation of the basic Creator/creature relationship, the Creator God has now become the created god. The Midrash points to the similarity between God’s punishment for the Golden Calf to that for the forbidden fruit.

The worshiping of the Golden Calf had more disastrous consequences for Israel than any other of its sins. God had resolved to give life everlasting to the people that would accept the Torah, hence Israel upon accepting the Torah gained supremacy over the angel of Death. But it lost this power when it worshipped the Golden Calf. . . . There is no sorrow that falls to Israel’s lot that is not in part a punishment for its worship of the Golden Calf.¹⁶

The events at Sinai reveal the tragic paradox which underlies the Divine/human relationship. Man who seeks reunion and reconciliation

with God inevitably succumbs to the temptation of separating himself from the Divine center to which he strives to return. The incident of the Golden Calf dramatically demonstrates the basic truth that reconciliation is not a gift that can be granted by God but a goal which must be constantly sought after by man.

Despite the gravity of the sin and the severity of the punishment, the overall thrust of the Sinai drama is one of hope and expectation for the future. Neither God nor Moses allows this act of disloyalty to break the creational bond which has been established between God and His people. Significantly, the incident of the Golden Calf occurs precisely between God's giving Moses His instructions for the building of the Tabernacle and the actual construction. The building of the Tabernacle is the concrete reaffirmation of God's presence in the midst of a "stiff-necked," sinful people. "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Exodus 33:14). Israel can turn away from God and reject His Torah but it can not break the bond which was established at Sinai; it can not change the fact that it was created to be God's counterpart in the conveyance of blessing to humanity. The people of Israel is God's sanctuary in the midst of a profane world; the center from which God's wondrous deeds will proceed.

And Moses said, "If now I have found favor in thy sight, Oh Lord, let the Lord, I pray Thee, go in the midst of us, although it is a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Thy inheritance." And He said, "Behold, I make a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been wrought (*nivra'ukh*) in all the earth or in any nation, and all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the Lord; for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you." (Exodus 34:9-10)

God reaffirms His covenant after the sin of the Golden Calf, using words, *nivra'ukh*, reminiscent of His original creation, *bara*. What God will do with Israel is as grand as what He did at creation. These are acts of such an unprecedented nature that only the language of creation can adequately describe them.

The Biblical drama of Creation has now come full circle: from the creation of the world to the creation of a people who will serve as the historical embodiment of God's creational plan for humanity. The people of Israel leave Sinai and resume the journey with God which began not with the Exodus from Egypt but with the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. At Eden, God placed a flaming sword at the entrance to the garden to prevent man and woman from reentering. The sword of fire signifies their separation from God, the unbridgeable gap between Divinity and humanity.

At Sinai, the people of Israel resumes its journey and, once again, there is an image of fire which stands between God and man. "And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire, that they may travel by day and by night

... the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people" (Exodus 13:21-22). The pillar of fire in the wilderness is, perhaps a counterpoint to the sword of fire at Eden: not a fire which separates and divides, but a fire which signifies the nearness and direction of God; not a fire which prohibits but one which protects.

Humanity is still on the move, but God is now its constant companion and guide. "Thou hast led in Thy steadfast love the people whom Thou hast redeemed, Thou has guided them by Thy strength to Thy holy abode" (Exodus 15:13). Humanity can never return to the Eden of the past, but there is now an Eden of the future. It is an Eden not created by God for man, but a joint Divine/human endeavor: to actualize God's creational plan for all humanity now encapsulated in the life of a people dwelling in its land. This is the goal adumbrated in the creation account and substantiated in the Exodus/Sinai drama. It is the goal to which God and Israel have committed themselves at Sinai. It is the essence of the people of Israel.

NOTES

1. Bernhard W. Anderson, *Interpretation* (January 1955), 3-20.
2. Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (Edinburgh/London: Oliver & Boyd 1966), 131-143.
3. Ludwig Köhler, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Tübingen, 1936), 70.
4. Terrence E. Fretheim, "The Reclamation of Genesis," *Interpretation, A Journal of Bible and Theology* (1991): 354-365.
5. Jergen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 206-214.
6. Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible, Genesis* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1974), 86-87.
7. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 105.
8. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1968) III, 30.
9. Terrence E. Fretheim, *Exodus - A Biblical Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 20, 30-31.
10. Fretheim, *The Reclamation of Genesis*.
11. *Sifre Deuteronomy, Reuven Hammer Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 359.
12. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 52.
13. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 104-105, 119.
14. Fretheim, *Reclamation of Genesis*, 362-363. For a more detailed and elaborate study of the connection between the cosmic and social orders see Frank H. Gorman, Jr., *The Ideology of Ritual* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1990). In her seminal study on pollution, Mary Douglas claims that Biblical dietary restrictions are an attempt to reaffirm the fundamental structural boundaries and separations through which the act of creation took place, "keeping distinct the categories of creation." *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 41-57.
15. *Exodus Rabbah* XXV, 12.
16. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 120.

DEBRA CASH

Matzah

When there was no time for yeast
and we were running away

When there was no time for pillows and blankets
and we slept in the desert with our shoes on

When there was no conversation over the fire
just bowed heads as we looked at our bowls

Then we knew our homes were gone
even if we went back to them

Even if we took up our tasks
and submitted to the lash

We had learned to do without.

We had begun our redemption.

Manna

Suddenly, there is enough.
In the morning, manna lies all around in pristine sheets
like wafers of snow, lace and light in crystals
you can gather into your arms like sheaves of wheat, like wildflowers,
and hold against your heart.
Butter in your mouth, the manna tastes of pleasures
New England cranberries, Japanese ginger, vanilla puddings and grilled trout
the flavor of laughter over the kitchen table, the flavor of shabbat.
This is a grace we did not know to wish for
sustenance we did not earn by sweat or theft or begging
a grace like spring when everything thaws
and the puddles reflect trees and still-inhabited nests
alive, ready,
despite everything.

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My Immigrant Family, the Popular Culture, and Me

SANFORD PINSKER

THAT JAMES JOYCE REGARDED STEPHEN DEDALUS'S ringing *non serviam* with heavy doses of ironic detachment was a point that escaped me entirely when I first read *A Portrait of the Artist* as a high school junior. After all, Stephen's quarrels seemed to me the very stuff of which heroism is made. By contrast, I dreamed my own version of Stephen's dreams in a small town an hour's drive from Pittsburgh, and, worse, in the middle of a middle-class Jewish family that made the philistines Stephen warred against look like small potatoes. Mine was not a battle of tastes in which the conventional championed Tennyson while the artistic held their ground for Byron, but, rather, one where my Aunt Sarah wept her way through Leon Uris's *Exodus* while my Uncle Milton heaped intricate Yiddish curses on anybody whose passion for Harry Golden's *Only in America!* fell short of his own. Nonetheless, Stephen and I became kindred spirits, fortified by the talismen of "silence, exile, and cunning" and dedicated to the proposition that life altered, rather than life itself, is what true artists care about.

I was also keenly aware of the ironies, for what had started with the books I read around our kitchen table and in the family quarrels they had provoked, ended years later in the relative calm of my study. And it was there that I began to think about the inextricable relationship between the high culture I tried to absorb like a sponge and the family that looked on my accomplishment with nearly equal measures of pride and worry.

Like many others of my generation, the Hebrew Bible was pounded into my head (sometimes quite literally) during long after-school sessions at the synagogue. Everything outside the building exemplified the America my parents came here to find: the candy store at the corner where we ponied up our nickels for soda pop and assorted goodies, the playground where those fortunate enough not to be Jewish played, the giddy freedom of people going about their business under the protective covering of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Inside, however, it was a very different story, one that flickered out of a dark, remote past and traveled down the hardwood benches on which the members of Beth class, myself included, squirmed.

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That we didn't want to be there goes without saying; that we pleaded, begged, cajoled, and sometimes faked illness was as predictable as was our parents' insistence that we learn about Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Moses and Aaron—and, moreover, that we learn about them *in Hebrew*. It was slow, often torturous work, but the stories turned out to be more infectious than I realized at the time. For what I saw, without quite knowing I had seen it, was the essential difference between stories beginning with "Once upon a time . . ." and those that began with "In the beginning . . ." Fairy tales captivate readers with a force that even a Bruno Bettelheim cannot quite explain, but Bible stories pack a double punch—not only the stuff of miracle and magic, of Daniel eluding his fate in a lion's den or David felling Goliath with a stone, but also the complicated networks of the heart that bind fathers to sons, one generation to another. Granted, the Hebrew Bible means to tell the saga of a people (and a Chosen People, no less!), but it unpacks that story in the gritty particulars of fully human people. And that is what we saw, despite ourselves, as we chimed out the Hebrew verses that brought Abraham to the altar on which he had bound Isaac or that caused Jacob to cheat his brother Esau out of an inheritance. If our rabbi tended to be sanctimonious, the characters we followed as the Books of Moses unfolded were not. They were simultaneously bigger and smaller than the folks we met at family celebrations, filled to overflowing with capacities for courage and cowardice, petty jealousies and stiff-necked pride. To imagine them stripped of their context as family members was impossible because it was in families that they were formed and within which they operated. Family—rather than character—was a man's fate, although there was probably an arithmetic between "family" and "character" that none of us had yet figured out.

By contrast, I read Homer, and later Shakespeare's plays, at the kitchen table: homework, after all, is meant to be done at home, and after the dinner dishes had been washed and put away, this is where I did mine. Like Virginia Woolf, I might have preferred a "room of one's own," a place off the beaten path to the refrigerator, but such extravagances were not in the family cards. At least my chair was more comfortable, more "broken in" after innumerable breakfasts, lunches, and dinners than the backbreaker of a bench I associated with Hebrew school; and besides, there was a certain logic in reading about the lavish feasts of epic literature in a place where one could at least get an egg cookie and a glass of milk. Besides, what is the story of Odysseus and Telemachus, of Hamlet and his father's ghost, of Prince Hal and Falstaff, if not stories of fathers and sons, of families separated by the vagaries of war or the clash of circumstance? True enough, nobody in my family talked in dactylic hexameter or dropped everything to fight wars in farflung Troy, but on certain nights when the kitchen struck me as particularly warm and the only sounds were those of pages turning as Achilles sulked in his tent or Odysseus outwitted the Cyclops, I felt intimations of the universal. The world was larger than this single house, this cramped kitchen—and literature was one of the ways you could know this.

What I've been describing thus far is hardly unique, but rather the sense all young readers probably have when they first realize that they love the few books they have come to know and that there are thousands, probably millions more

awaiting them in the library. What interests me, however, is the way in which I kept missing the rich material at the end of my nose. For literature struck me then as an escape from, rather than a confrontation with, my family; and, of course, as a way of learning about worlds far removed from the one I actually occupied.

Interestingly enough, I could make much the same claim for the images that beamed out at me from our family's 10-inch DuMont. They represented something of a personal victory, evidence (if any were needed) that whining could get results and that, in America, Jewish-American sons were destined to have their way. I say this because my father regarded television as in roughly the same category as car radios—that is, as unnecessary, and certainly as too expensive. The way he saw it, if he happened to be riding in somebody else's car and they *happened* to flick on the radio, a bit of music or a couple innings of a ball game, that was fine; but the car salesman who could have convinced him to spring for the extravagance of a radio has yet to be born. So far as he was concerned, car radios were in the same league as whitewall tires or two-tone paint jobs; and the Yiddish word he used to describe all of the above—*narishkeit* (foolishness)—spoke volumes about the gruff, thoroughly skeptical way many immigrant Jews regarded the more celebrated aspects of American culture.

Initially, my father felt the same way about television. If he happened to be visiting our neighbor down the street, and the set *happened* to be on, he had no objection to sitting down and watching. His, in short, was hardly a thought-out, principled set of objections. Unlike those intellectuals, both would-be and genuine, who measure the height of their brows by the contempt they can work up about the “boob tube”—on moral, aesthetic, or political grounds—my father's disenchantment sprang from simpler sources. Well into the 1950s, he continued to be haunted by Depression memories and a nagging sense that “the age of affluence” was likely to go bust. In this regard, his fears now seem less ridiculous than they once did when I was an impatient ten year old not adverse to complaining about how every kid in America—except me, of course—was able to watch “Howdy Doody” on his family's TV set.

Eventually, my exaggerations turned true. Block parties to watch Uncle Miltie gave way to individual ownership, and, soon, even my father relented. We, too, learned how to arrange our living room—and our lives—around a 10-inch DuMont. By today's standards, early television sets were a pathetic affair: scratchy sound, intermittent “ghosts,” and, of course, a grainy black-and-white picture. But no matter. There was “Captain Video” and “Hopalong Cassidy,” Milton Berle's “Texaco Star Theater,” and for my folks, “The Goldbergs.” Indeed, the last show struck them as reason enough to cast a kind word television's way, for Mollie's incoherent match-making and warmhearted meddling made our very DuMont seem kosher. They gazed into the screen and what beamed back at them—with a pinch here, a tug there—was themselves.

A few years later, African Americans would feel much the same way about “Amos 'n Andy.” For both groups, ethnic identification was what mattered. Curiously enough, I had no problem, then or now, with “Amos 'n Andy,” but found myself bristling at the Goldbergs. They were just too goody-goody, too saccharine by half. Granted, I kept such opinions to myself; besides, in an age sans the remote control, sons watched the channel fathers selected. It was not

until Sophie Portnoy announced her one crime—namely that she was “too good”—that I knew why Mollie put me off. She was the sha-sha generation’s most visible spokesperson, as well as the aunt who always admonished me for being such a *vilde chaya*.

As I remember the house in which my family gathered to watch “I Remember Mama,” I’m sure that none of us imagined we were witnesses to what would later be called television’s golden age,” or that one of us—namely, me—would come to write about television. After all, television shows were, at best, “entertainments” and more often, simply mindless diversions, hardly fit subjects for intellectual analysis. But the fact of the matter is that we watched a good many television shows as a family, and even learned to develop half a taste for TV dinners and the wobbly tables on which they were served. If baseball and candy stores had Americanized an earlier generation of immigrant Jews, television largely did the trick for mine.

At the same time, however, the image of family life being celebrated seemed very remote from the one I was experiencing. To put it bluntly, my father bore not the slightest resemblance to those wonderfully bumbling fathers who held down the living room anchor chair on shows such as “Ozzie and Harriet,” “Father Knows Best,” or “Leave It to Beaver.” They wore cardigan sweaters that seemed perfectly appropriate and in my naive eyes, even a fashion statement. By contrast, nobody in *my* family casually slipped into a sweater like that after dinner and the only person I ever remember wearing one was my Uncle Sid who was, believe me, no Ozzie Nelson, no Robert Anderson, no Ward Cleaver.

But *that*, as you might have guessed, was only the tip of a much larger, much deeper iceberg, for it soon became clear—very clear—that we did not live in anything remotely like their houses nor did our family and theirs have anything in common. For example, my father struggled to eke out a meager living as a dry goods salesman—in reality, a scant step up from being a peddler—while it was never clear, no matter how closely I paid attention, exactly what Ozzie Nelson did between his bright chatter over orange juice and his evenings wrapped inside his cardigan. What I did notice, however, is that he never raised his voice or punctuated his sentences with his hands. He remained unflappable, good-natured, altogether unlike the father I knew—the one who slipped into Yiddish when he didn’t want me to know how desperate things, in fact, were, and who shouted if and when he felt like it.

Imagine my surprise when I discovered that nobody, absolutely nobody, actually lived the life I secretly envied, and that my Jewishness or their goyishness had nothing to do with it. Look for realism on TV sit-coms and you will search in vain, for none of the television families that caught on big in the 1950s had the remotest relationship to life as it was actually being lived in the suburbs, the small towns, or the big cities. Rather, what they served up was a sanitized version of the nuclear family according to *Life* magazine—a world where corporate America had jobs for those men willing to don gray flannel suiting, and wives were offered the rewards of tract homes and kitchens filled with the latest appliances (Mixmasters, electric knives, blenders, even automatic dishwashers). That there was a darker, more anxious underbelly to the placid fifties is true enough—one thinks of the defiant James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* (1956),

and perhaps most spectacularly, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), J. D. Salinger's enduring portrait of adolescence in turmoil.

Still, what defined the fifties for most of us were books such as the Reverend Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952), which argued that religious belief enhanced one's material well-being; songs such as "Love and Marriage"; styles that began with the crew cut on one's head and ended with the white bucks on one's feet; Little League games and Tupperware parties; the families I tried mightily to identify with on "Father Knows Best" and "Leave It to Beaver"; and, *lehavdil*, the one I encountered between the covers of Sydney Taylor's *All-of-a-Kind Family* books. Unlike the artificial world in which nobody worked and children simply played, Taylor made it clear that religious observance was more than merely opening presents and that there were families that shared experiences and meanings rather than plunging off in radically differing, ruggedly individualistic, directions.

Nonetheless, Jewish-American life during those years was longer on assimilation than religious-cultural preservation. Indeed, how could anyone remain either aloof or immune from these consequences? If the suburbs were a measure of what postwar affluence and a new, improved standard of living could mean, they were also the death knell for synagogue life as it had existed in previous decades. Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) exposed the new Jewish suburbia's vulgar, philistinish aspects with the relish of a young satirist who made it a point of honor to take no prisoners. He was on the way to becoming a household word and when he got to *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), he, at last, arrived. No matter that, in my household, the name was *momzer*, or that Roth spent the next decades trying to convince a larger Jewish-American public that under his thick, writerly skin beats the heart of a Nice Jewish Boy. The standoff seems destined to forever divide those who think of writers as unpaid PR people for normative Judaism and those who think of writers as, well, *writers*.

Meanwhile, American rabbis learned—perhaps far too well—how to go with the flow and adjust to the very real possibility that they might not see their constituency from one Yom Kippur to the next. They even learned to make jokes about it. One of them goes like this: two rabbis once discovered that they shared the same unpleasant condition—namely, rats in the basement of the synagogue. As the first rabbi went on and on about how upset he was, the second rabbi said, "Don't worry. I had the same problem, but I made it go away." "How?" the second rabbi asks. "Easy," replies the first, "One Shabbos afternoon I assembled all the rats and gave them a bar-mitzvah. Now, I never see them anymore."

One could argue that much of the sixties continued the "tradition" of squeaky-clean families, albeit in enlarged or grotesque forms. "The Brady Bunch" and "The Partridge Family" are examples of the former while "The Patty Duke Show"—with its bizarre premise about "identical cousins"—can stand for the latter. Indeed, it wasn't until "All in the Family" that America could hear a toilet (TER-let, in Archie Bunkereese), flush, much less hear a bigot ranting about the America that has steadily gone downhill since WW-2—the "Big One," as Archie likes to put it. Is it of no consequence that the shaping hand of "All in the Family"—everything from its dashes of realism to its larger doses of political liberalism—was Norman Lear, a Jewish-American shaper of

the popular culture, just as a generation of Jewish-American moguls had invented Hollywood decades before?

As the standard wisdom would have it, satire is what closes on Saturday night because paying customers don't want to see a mirror held up to their warts. "All in the Family" not only proved a provocative exception to the rule, but also that characters in a sit-com can change their identifying spots over a long run. Like many others, I found it easy—perhaps a bit *too* easy—to identify with the Mike, the "meat head," as he valiantly tried to point out the errors of his father-in-law's ways; but even I eventually had to face up to those moments when Archie's vulnerable, altogether human side shone through, and when it became clear that Edith was hardly the "dingbat" Archie claimed her to be. If the result was a far cry from the gritty richness one could find in the Hebrew Bible, at least television had taken a giant step from the days when episodes of "I Love Lucy" were virtually interchangeable.

At the same time, however, what the ensemble approach to television casting led to were a variety of shows that recontextualized the traditional family unit into a virtually endless array of substitutes. There was, for example, the pioneering "Mary Tyler Moore" show in which the workplace—in this case, a television station—suggested possibilities for the "new woman" that were markedly different from those that surrounded the dutiful, suburban *hausfrau* Mary Tyler Moore had played on the older "Dick Van Dyke Show." Roughly the same metamorphosis occurred on shows such as "M.A.S.H.," "WKRP," "Hill Street Blues," "St. Elsewhere," and, of course, "Cheers"—all destined to become what the business calls "mega-hits," and all exploring aspects of family-as-workplace.

Granted, television is more given to recycling past successes than in pioneering new forms, which is why the 1980s could give us "Ozzie and Harriet" in blackface and call it "The Cosby Show" or the extended family of "The Waltons" could end up as "Family Matters." My point is that television families with children the cuter the better probably have a permanent claim on one side of the coin, while parodic, dysfunctional counterparts from the underachieving Bart Simpson to the wisecracking O'Connor brood are currently in residence on the other.

In short, "that's entertainment"—meaning that television situation comedy depends heavily on the laughs that domesticity simultaneously generates and insures. By contrast, family life was no laughing matter for our more serious American writers, both those who pronounced it lit-er-a-toor, as well as those who hankered for redder meat and generally regarded the family as an impediment rather than a possibility. The forest or the Territories have always seemed more appealing than home-and-hearth. Only in America, as my uncle's favorite author might put it, has there been such a sustained effort to negate History and to render the family itself irrelevant. Written in shorthand, an accounting of American literature might look like this: *der heim* is what our classic American protagonists leave. Moreover, the woods, rather than the marketplace, is where they are headed—nearly always westward and almost certainly without baggage. That there were exceptions to this general rule is true enough (one thinks immediately of, say, Henry James, a writer who knew to his bones that families were what made

“manners” possible), but one could argue that the anomalies never took, and that, as a consequence, American fiction was always better at describing aspects of freedom than it was of imagining modes of responsibility.

In this regard, Jewish-American writers have always been the exception, even when they might have preferred otherwise. For if it is the parochial, potentially suffocating Jewish-American family against which these young writers struggle, it is also the family to which they inevitably return. One sees this in Bernard Malamud’s assorted “sufferers,” increasingly among Philip Roth’s aging protagonists, and always in Saul Bellow’s sad eggheads. Like Southern fabulists from William Faulkner to Eudora Welty, families—however tension-producing or complicated—have *always* been a prominent feature of the Jewish-American landscape.

Nonetheless, notions about “family” have changed markedly throughout our century. Consider, for example, a novel such as Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* which moves from Ma Joads’s definition of family as “kin” to her son’s evolving, increasingly political definition of family as the proletariat, as those who must get together and yell if laborers are to receive their due—in short, as writers in the Depression thirties defined the term, *mankind*.

At this point let me suggest that what we have been experiencing in our more recent fiction is nothing less than what Thomas Kuhn calls a “paradigm shift,” a subtle, nearly imperceptible movement away from an older condition in which novelists operated, consciously or unconsciously, under the grip of family (either by attraction or, more frequently, as repulsion) to a new model in which novelists write under a very different sort of grip—namely, the grip of ideas. The result of this altered consciousness threatens to eradicate literary families altogether. Not surprisingly, the grip of ideas currently takes many forms, from the legacies of postmodernist experimentation to the insistence that literature must be written with special interest agendas firmly in mind, from the tight-lipped, bottle-clenching minimalism of Raymond Carver to the K-Mart realism and AM radio bleatings of Ann Beattie. Taken together, however, the result has made the very notion of “family” seem both inert and impossibly old-fashioned.

Established writers know enough to know better, which is to say that notions of the family are not likely to disappear any time soon from the work of people such as John Updike, Philip Roth, or Anne Tyler. Nonetheless, a sober assessment of much postmodernist fiction can only conclude that the family has become something of an endangered species. One need not belabor the fact that “families” were a prominent feature of the “so-called real world” that postmodernist fiction refused to touch with plastic gloves and a ten-foot pole.

I was hardly immune to the dizzying excitements of those times, those places when John Barth was the with-it generation’s equivalent of the cat’s pajamas. Some enjoyed getting lost in his various “fun houses”; others took a peculiar pleasure in keeping track of his increasingly complicated tales-within-tales. Nor was Barth hardly the only player fascinated by fictions that mirrored fictionality. When critics set about rounding up the usual subjects for book-length studies on metafiction, names such as Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and Thomas Pynchon received chapters of their own. The rub, of course, is that postmodernist fiction was often more fun to talk about than to re-read, not only

because its experimentations were often sterile, but also because its characters seemed so dehumanized. Families did not much matter because their connections failed to move anybody to love or hatred.

Meanwhile, as the dust from several decades of postmodernist experimentation settles, what we see are those writers who stayed the course, plugging away writing novels with such admittedly old-fashioned characteristics as plot, social realism, characters, and even a kind word or two to say about “family.” I am thinking about people like Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Anne Tyler; but I also have in mind those novelists who write what look for all the world like family sagas by adding new wrinkles to the old formulae. Toni Morrison’s *The Song of Solomon* (1978), for example, so mixes elements of African folklore with aspects of magical realism that the result forces us to redefine what Stephen Dedalus meant by “history” and certainly to reinterpret what he imagines as “flight.” Others have defined the family so radically that it turns out to be versions of sisterhood (e.g., Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, 1983) or peculiarly restricted to supportive grandmothers (e.g., Alice Hoffman). Moreover, when one adds a renewed interest in ethnic writing of the sort exemplified in Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* (1984), Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club* (1989), Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), the prospects for a new sense of family history and a revitalized social realism have, in fact, never looked better.

James Joyce knew that the only story one can tell, or certainly that *he* could tell, was about how fathers and sons, despite themselves, become reunited. I would not have believed that important truth for a moment when I was young and in the grip of what I imagined to be a tough-minded modernism. Apparently, Philip Roth labored under similar misconceptions as he makes painfully, eloquently clear in *Patrimony* (1991). Too many postmodernist writers have so concerned themselves with the glitter of “text” that they have forgotten this important—I would claim, *essential*—subtext. Instead, they seek in fictions about fictions what the young Stephen Dedalus sought—namely, a way to fly past not only the nets of family, church, and state, but also the messiness of daily life itself. Is this, perhaps, why so many Jews are once again rediscovering the complicated, altogether human stories of the Hebrew Bible?

One thing at least seems abundantly clear: self-conscious exercises in literary dazzle cannot engage us at those moments when the computer is turned off and the study closed to academic business. For fiction is not finally made from other fictions but from the tougher, heart-wrenching business of defining oneself in the larger context of one’s family. Postmodernist experimentation failed not only because its dazzling surfaces were hollow at the core, but also because its settings had no discernible address, its characters’ bones no flesh, and its families no force. If literature is once again to become a humanistic enterprise, it needs to imagine fully human beings, and I would argue that that requires fully human families. No doubt my own parents were trying to tell me something very much like that long ago, but I, like many others of my generation, was too impatient, too cocksure of myself, to listen.

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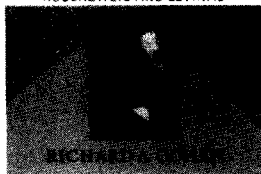
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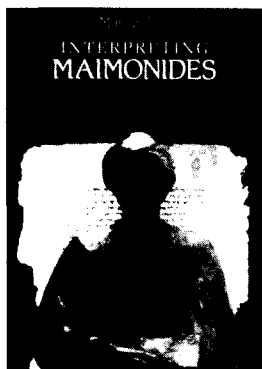
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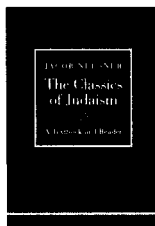
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